
“Beware of False Teachers”

2 Peter 2:1-22

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(2 Peter 2:1-22)

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves.² Many will follow their depraved conduct and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.³ In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.

⁴ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment; ⁵ if he did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people, but protected Noah, a preacher of righteousness, and seven others; ⁶ if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷ and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless ⁸ (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)—⁹ if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.¹⁰ This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority.

Bold and arrogant, they are not afraid to heap abuse on celestial beings;¹¹ yet even angels, although they are stronger and more powerful, do not heap abuse on such beings when bringing judgment on them from the Lord.¹² But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish.

¹³ They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. Their idea of pleasure is to carouse in broad daylight. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you.¹⁴ With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood!¹⁵ They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness.¹⁶ But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—an animal without speech—who spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.

¹⁷ These people are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them.¹⁸ For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of the flesh, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.¹⁹ They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for “people are slaves to whatever has mastered them.”²⁰ If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.²¹ It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.²² Of them the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,” and, “A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.”

Chapter 2 is all about false teachers. I don't know if you've noticed in your reading of the Scriptures, but there's a lot of teachings and warnings regarding false teachers. Jesus spoke repeatedly of false teachers, namely the Jewish leaders of his day. He referred to them as wolves in sheep's clothing. He said, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matthew 7:15). Paul repeatedly warned against false teachers in nearly every letter he wrote.

John, also, warned his readers about false teachers in his letters, but as we know, false teachers were not only a problem in the ancient world, it's been a problem in every generation. It's been a problem ever since mankind existed. Who was the first false teacher? It was the devil, in the garden, tempting Eve to eat from the tree that was forbidden by God. God gave very explicit commands to Adam and Eve. He said, "Everything in the garden is yours. You can eat whatever you want, except do not eat the fruit of this one tree." That's it. Then the devil approached Eve and spoke falsely to her, contradicting the specific command of God. False teaching has always been around, and it is still around today. Therefore, it's important for all Christians to be able to discern what is false and what is true, as it relates to the *teacher* and to the *teaching*. Are you able to distinguish between the true and the false? If we cannot distinguish between what is false and true, then we cannot know what to accept and what to reject. This is our subject for today.

This chapter tells us what false teachers are like. It also tells the dangers they bring. And it tells us what their fate will be. Let's begin.

What are false teachers like?

As I've already said, the Apostle Peter tells us here, that false teachers have always been around. In V1 he tells us that there were false prophets in Old Testament times, and there are false prophets in the church to which Peter was writing, and there are false teachers today. There will be false teachers until the Lord returns.

The false teachers that Peter mentions are knowingly false teachers. It is possible to be a false teacher unknowingly, and it is also possible to be a false teacher knowingly. A pastor or teacher might sincerely believe that what he is teaching is true, so he will continue teaching it. It's still wrong, but he doesn't know it, but there are also those who know what they are teaching is not true and yet out of impure motives, still teach it.

For example, some of you have watched the Netflix movie, American Gospel, which exposes the prosperity gospel movement. One of the speakers in that movie is a pastor-scholar, who wrote his dissertation on the false teacher, Benny Hinn. He himself has cerebral palsy and is confined to a wheelchair. I read his dissertation years ago and here are some of the things I remember. He was going into his research as a person who believes that if God so chooses, he can heal people. He went into his research as unbiased and as objective as possible. His conclusion regarding Benny Hinn was one of two things. Either he is self-deceived, meaning that he doesn't believe that what he is teaching and doing is wrong. He believes it is right, and that's why he holds his crusades and his television ministry. OR, he is deceptive, meaning that he knows what he's teaching and doing is wrong, but is teaching it anyway, for an ulterior motive. Though the author gave these two choices, he was leaning toward the latter. That's what I mean that false teachers and even every day Christians can unknowingly be teaching and believe the wrong stuff, OR, far more sinister, they or we, can be knowingly believing and teaching the wrong stuff.

With the Apostle Peter, the false teachers he's addressing are of the worst kind. Look at how he describes them. "They will *secretly* introduce destructive heresies (v1)." In v18 he says they "entice people." It's not like they've invented a new religion and are setting up shop on the other side of town. No, while remaining in the church, they are intentionally, secretly, introducing false, destructive heresies. A heresy is a false teaching, a teaching that goes against apostolic teaching or biblical teaching.

How do we know what is a heresy and what is merely a difference of opinion? This is a very important question for us to ask and answer. There are many issues that different denominations and different Christians can and do disagree on. For example, things like,

- Infant baptism vs. believer's baptism.
- Different forms of church government
- Different views toward how the end times will occur
- Different views on the spiritual gifts
- Different views on the role of women in the church

These are some of the issues that Christians and churches have held differing views, and yet they are still Christian.

Now, what are some of the false teachings that are considered as a heresy?

Throughout church history the major heresies have been around two things. The first is on the doctrine of God, the Trinity and, in particular, the doctrine of Christ. We don't have time to explore them today.

The other area of heresy or false teaching is directly related to the Gospel. Let me give you a modern example of that. *About 10-15 years ago, our country began the legislative process of legalizing gay marriage. Around the same time, the Anglican church in Canada was following the same path. They too had decided to allow the officiating of same-sex unions. The Anglican church, as a result, split. Those who were against same-sex union and for upholding the biblical definition of marriage left the Anglican church of Canada and formed a new denomination. It was during this upheaval that I came across a video of an interview with Dr. J.I. Packer. He's a Canadian Anglican, and perhaps the most respected theologian of the last 50 years. The Anglican church he was attending was right smack in the middle of the controversy. He was being interviewed about all that was going on and was asked, "why is this such an important issue?" "Why is this such a big deal?" "What's at stake?" "Why is this worth splitting the church over?" His answer gave me so much clarity in understanding what was going on. He said, "Because this is a Gospel issue."*

What did he mean by that? By teaching that homosexuality is permissible, you are telling us that the Gospel doesn't have the power to change lives. You are calling good, what God calls an abomination. You are saying that Christ didn't come to save, or he doesn't need to save, the greedy and the adulterer and the liar and fornicator and the homosexual." This is a Gospel issue. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul rebuked Peter because of a Gospel issue. The Gospel says that those who are saved are part of a united community called the church, and yet Peter was unwilling to associate with the Gentile converts. To Paul, that was unacceptable. So, those are the two areas of heresy: Tampering with doctrines about God and corrupting the message of the Gospel. These aren't the only areas, but throughout church history, these have been the most common. This is what false teachers do.

What is the danger of false teaching?

Well, the first danger to us is believing in the false teaching and following after these false teachers (v2). If that happens then we will be led astray from faithful teachers of God's word, and we'll be led away from God's truth that's rooted in the Scriptures, and then there's a strong possibility that we will face the same fate as them.

As well, it will bring the way of truth into disrepute (v2). The word 'disrepute' literally means 'blasphemy.' Another translation says that the truth will be maligned. When a Christian or a group of Christians begins to tolerate and entertain false teaching, what it does is that it maligns that which is really true. By believing what is false, you are calling what is false, true; and what is true, false. That's what blasphemy is. It's to speak untruthfully about God, or disrespectfully about God, or in a dishonorable way about God.

Another danger is that the hearers will be exploited (v3). You see this passage teaches that false teachers often have two hidden motives that are hidden under the guise of their false teaching. And we've heard enough weird stories about strange cults and wayward churches and leaders to know this is true. The first hidden motive is money. They are greedy (v3). V14 says, they are experts in greed. They want to get rich at your expense.

Second, they want to exploit women sexually. They want to satisfy their sexual appetite. V10 says they follow the corrupt desires of the flesh. V12 says they are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct. V13 says they carouse in broad daylight. V14 says their eyes are full of adultery, they seduce the unstable. V18 says they appeal to the lustful desires of the flesh. They're in a position of influence, power. Often, they're great talkers, they're charming, and can assert great manipulation to weak and vulnerable women.

It's shocking how graphic Peter is with the language. It's like the information a soldier will get about his enemy in basic training. The enemy is terrible. If you fall into the hands of the enemy, they will torture you, they will do unspeakable things to you. Be aware and be alert. Or it's like the very honest conversation I had with my daughter when she was entering her teenage years. "All boys are pigs. They only have one thing on their minds. Do not be deceived!" Peter does the same thing here, especially since he knows that his time on earth is coming to an end.

Here's another danger: they offer false promises. Look down to verse 19. "They promise freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity." Even for the false teacher, their message must be appealing. They're like the snake oil salesman. Even though they know what's in the bottle is nothing, they at least have to have a good sales pitch and appeal to the needs of the audience. This is what these false teachers do. They offer false promises. You will be healed, they say. You will be free, they say. All you need to do is send in a donation of a hundred dollars, and all your problems will go away. All they have to offer are false promises.

The true message of the Bible is not like that. It begins by telling us lot of bad news first, before we get to the good news. It says, you are a rebel. You are a sinner. You are God's enemy. You deserve the just punishment for your sins. There is nothing you can do to save yourself. Then it says, God loves you, God forgives you, Jesus died for you, repent, believe and enter your rest. And it says, deny yourself, take up your cross, follow Jesus. So, beware of their false and empty promises. So, we looked at what a false teacher is like. We looked at what the dangers are.

Next...

What is their judgment?

What awaits these false teachers? Oh boy. It goes from bad to worse.

V1 says that swift destruction is coming upon them.

V3 says that their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. This means that it may appear like they're getting away with what they're doing, but not so. Condemnation and destruction are coming. They will be severely judged.

Blackest darkness is reserved for them (v17).

To illustrate his point, Peter goes on a short tour of the Old Testament to give us an idea of the kind of judgment they will receive. He gives four examples, and then another to cap it off. The first is about the angels when they sinned. This is likely referring to the Nephilim who had illicit relations with humans, in Genesis 6. Then he speaks of the flood during the time of Noah. The third example is the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The fourth example is the rescue of Lot from Sodom. And then the fifth example is that of Balaam.

What are these examples supposed to tell us? Well, the first three can be lumped together to teach us that God is a holy judge that does not let sin go unpunished. The angels sinned and they were held to account. The ancient world, during the time of Noah, was wicked to the core, knowing and doing wickedness all the time. And God sent a terrible judgment through the flood. Sodom and Gomorrah were depraved and ungodly cities. And God used fire and brimstone to execute his judgment, burning everyone who remained behind. Peter uses these examples to tell us that God does not change. There is no such thing as an Old Testament God and a New Testament God. One that was mean and grumpy and one that's nice and gentle. No, God does not change. He is the same, yesterday, today and forever. He was holy and just in the Old Testament. He is the same in the New Testament. He is compassionate and gracious in the New Testament, but he was always compassionate and gracious, even in the Old Testament. So, if God did not spare his wrath back then, if he was just and holy back then, then he will be the same to false teachers today, as he was back then. This is what awaits them.

The second thing we learn from these examples is that God saves the righteous even in the midst of a sinful world. Noah and his family were saved. Lot, a righteous man, was saved. That means, we too, if we are one of his righteous ones, will be saved from a wicked and corrupt generation.

We must never think or believe that there will ever be an evil deed that God will not hold to account. Every wicked thought, every wicked word, and every wicked deed, God will judge. When Jesus returns, there will be a final judgment, where the wicked and righteous will be separated for all eternity. The righteous will enter heaven and enjoy eternal fellowship with God. And the wicked will be sent to hell for eternity, to suffer their just punishment for all their wickedness, and their rejection of the truth, which is truth in the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Now, let's look at the last example. It's the story of Balaam. For this you have to go back to the book of Numbers. Here's a quick summary of the story. This was during the times of the travels of the Israelites after they were rescued by God from Pharaoh in Egypt. They came to the area of Moab and the king of Moab, Balak, was afraid of the Israelites and wanted to have a holy man, a soothsayer, a spiritualist, a diviner, to utter a curse upon Israel, and that man was Balaam. Balaam wasn't a Jew. He was just some pagan fortune teller. But God intervened and told Balaam, "You are only allowed to speak what I command you to speak." So instead of cursing Israel, he ends up blessing Israel. Several times he does this and in his final blessing, he proclaims the coming of the Messiah, as the highest blessing and, of course, Balaam had a donkey that spoke like a man and rebuked him. What's the comparison? Balaam was a false prophet, with a wicked heart. If it was not for God's intervention and even the miraculous intervention of his donkey, Balaam would have spoken curses, and falsities and un-truths for money. He was a prophet for hire. The false prophets in Peter's day, are of the same kind as the false prophet Balaam. They will be rebuked, just as Balaam was rebuked. Balaam was rebuked by his own donkey. These false teachers will be rebuked by God. What eventually happened to Balaam? Did this episode of being used by God lead to his conversion? No. It didn't. He died under the hand of Joshua for being a diviner. This is the fate of all false teachers. There is a harsher judgment that awaits them.

As an aside, I do want to take a brief moment to speak about the Apostle Peter's understanding of the Old Testament. More than in the New Testament, the Old Testament is filled with spectacular, supernatural events. Most people put these events under the category of myth or fable or legend. They would never consider them as factual or scientifically possible. So, we modern Christians are faced with a dilemma. What are we to make of these stories? Are we also to view them as mythical, as folklore? Are they just fancy illustrations to prove a more profound underlying point? Or, are we to understand them as actually having occurred, as historical events, as events where God intervened into the world of men, and bent the laws of nature? Are we to view them as real supernatural occurrences? Well, let's learn from Peter. When he speaks of the Nephilim in Genesis 6, and the flood, and Noah, and Sodom and Gomorrah, and the ancient person Lot, and the pagan diviner Balaam and his talking donkey, do we get any sense that Peter views these as fictional? Is Peter basing his entire argument about the judgment of false teachers, and the rescue of the righteous on fairy tales? When we read the words of Peter at face value, and for that matter, when we read the words of Paul, and Jesus, whenever they reference the Old Testament, they all view it the same way. As historical, as actually having occurred in the past, in time and space, not merely in someone's imagination.

The reason I'm taking the time on this sidebar is because there are many Christians who don't believe all of the Bible. They don't believe the miraculous, they don't believe the supernatural. If that's the true with you, then you can't believe in the resurrection. You can't believe God can intervene in your life and guide you down the right path. That means that you don't need to pray, because to pray is to believe God answers prayer, and to believe God answers prayer is to believe that he intervenes, he changes things, he acts on your behalf. As Paul said, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" (Acts 26:8). Why would the miraculous be hard for God? Who is God? He's the creator, ex nihilo! He made everything out of nothing, just by speaking. He said, "Exist!" and it existed. Why then would he not be able to send a flood or fire and brimstone or speak through an animal, or raise his Son Jesus from the dead?

Okay, end of sidebar. Let's conclude.

There are many false teachers out there, in our society. They may be knowingly deceiving or even unknowingly deceiving. For us, as Christians, we must be careful and wise. We must stay true to God's Word and teach it to new and old believer alike. We must teach it to our children, to the next generation.

Let's pray.