

## Week 6 - The Danger of False Teachers - 2Peter 2:1-3

### Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 13:1-11

#### Introduction

As we have just seen from our Scripture reading, God took prophesying falsely quite seriously in the Old Testament Likewise, in the New Testament, we see many warnings against leading others astray

Jesus taught his disciples that *“temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea...”* [Luke 17:1-2]

Leading others astray and causing them to sin is serious business and an exceedingly great sin

It might actually be difficult to come up with a worse sin that one person could commit against another than to damage them in this life - and potentially for all eternity - through teaching spiritual falsehood

And Jesus characterized false teachers as wolves who seek to devour the innocent in **Matthew 7:15**:

*“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”*

Now, having set the stage in the previous section of his letter, Peter is ready to directly address his main concern - false teachers from within the church who he opposes

And he states that just as there were false prophets in the period of the Old Testament; there will be false teachers among the faithful in the church

And, just like the false prophets in the Old Testament, these false teachers will be those who do not speak the truth

And the sphere of activity for the false teachers is “among you,” meaning God’s people, the church, just as the activity of the false prophets was “among the people,” meaning God’s people, Israel

So what we see Peter providing here is a typological connection between what ancient Israel encountered and what his readers are now experiencing

Once again, we see that, despite all our progress in so many ways, people really haven’t changed

And when we look at all the teachings in the New Testament regarding false teachers, we see that they will be a problem for the church until the end of the age

Jesus himself foretold that fact in Matthew 24, saying in **Matthew 24:24** that in the very last days –

*False christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.*

No matter how sophisticated and advanced we may think ourselves to be, mankind continually faces the same problems and falls into the same sins

So let’s turn our attention to our passage and see what Peter has to say to us as he introduces the false teachers

Turn in your Bible to 2Peter 2 and follow along as I read verses 1-3 [2Peter 2:1-3]

*But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*

If you are taking notes, we will begin by looking at the **deportment** of the false teachers - that is to say, their behavior

Then, in Roman numeral two, we will look at the **disruption** of the false teachers - the damage they cause

And, in Roman numeral three, we will look at the **destruction** of the false teachers - the results they bring on themselves

## **I. The deportment of the false teachers**

We need to note that Peter is talking here about false teachers arising in the midst or “among” the faithful

These false teachers cannot be true believers, however, because of the punishment that awaits them - condemnation and destruction, as we will see in a bit

This situation would be analogous to the parable of the wheat and tares wherein the tares look a great deal like wheat but are not - these false teachers only *appear* and, in all likelihood, claim to be true believers

And although they present themselves as Christ-followers, they are only in the church but not actually *of* the church

Let’s look at three things that Peter reveals about the deportment, or the behavior, of the false teachers

### **A. They bring in heresies**

The first thing we see is that they will bring in heresies or false teachings

And most English translations suggest that these people will use stealth tactics to introduce their error

However, the term Peter uses doesn’t necessarily include secrecy

According to my Greek Lexicon, the word translated as “bring in” means “to cause something to happen by introducing factors from the outside.”

And while the term can indicate secrecy, and it makes sense that a successful heresy is one that is cloaked in the truth, only the context can indicate whether that element is intended or not

So we can safely say that Peter’s emphasis isn’t on the secretive nature of the action but that something was brought in from the outside of the circle of true believers

The attempted to create divisions or sects within the church, just as the Pharisees and Sadducees were sects in Judaism

And they did so by bringing in foreign teaching because that’s what heresy is

The false teachers were bringing in and propagating a school of thought that was contradictory to apostolic teaching, the prophetic word, and the Christian community

And just to make clear the nature of these teachings, Peter attaches the adjective “destructive” to them

In other words, not only was this teaching foreign to the church, but it was also not helpful or godly - it was harmful

Rather than build up; it tore down

The natural conclusion we can deduce is that these teachings are destructive because they lead to the destruction of those who follow them, as we will see Peter declare later on

### **B. They will deny the Lord**

The second thing Peter reveals about the false teachers is that they deny “*the Master who bought them*”

I have to admit that this statement caused me a bit of trouble as I was studying and trying to understand what Peter meant

The idea of the Lord or “Master” buying them makes it appear that they are redeemed individuals and that naturally led to the question as to how they could end up in everlasting destruction as we will see Peter declare later on

However, we need to remember that Peter began here by comparing the prophets of old with the false teachers of today and understand that he need not be referring to Christ’s redemptive work on the cross at all with this statement

In **Deuteronomy 32:6** we see Moses say to the rebellious people who have turned away from God “Is not he your father who *acquired* you?”

“Acquired” is the literal translation of the Hebrew word and the word found in the Greek version of the Old Testament that the ESV translates “created” so when we translate it literally, we see the parallel thought in our passage

Any orthodox Jew from the time of the Exodus on would have considered himself or herself to have been bought by God and, therefore, God's own possession

And Peter is pointing out that, just as there were rebellious Jews who turned away from God to prophesy falsely, there would be false teachers within the church who would deny God's rightful ownership of them

That interpretation makes sense in light of Peter's rhetorical method here

Still, *if* Peter had Christ's redemptive work in view, there is only one viable explanation that doesn't contradict passages in the Bible that speak of the eternal security of the believer

That would be the doctrine of unlimited atonement that says Christ's sacrifice on the cross was sufficient for all even if it isn't accepted by all

So, in that sense, the Master has paid the price, or bought, everyone but these false teachers take the path of most people and do not accept the payment and therefore deny the Master who bought them

That interpretation also makes good sense but what we need to understand is that the false teachers were not true followers of Christ regardless of how they might have appeared -

It's not possible in light of the destruction that Peter says will be their ultimate outcome

Paul spoke of such men in **2Corinthians 11:12-15** -

*And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.*

Notice that Paul calls these men "false apostles," "deceitful workmen," and "servants" of Satan who disguise themselves as apostles of Christ - hardly names that we would ever associate with believers even if they are wayward believers

### **C. They will exploit the church out of greed**

The third thing we learn about the false teachers is their motive for exploiting the church - greed

Look with me at verse 3 [**2Peter 2:3**] where Peter writes:

*And in their greed they will exploit you with false words.*

Greed is the strong desire to acquire more and more or to possess more than other people have, irrespective of need

And while we usually think of greed in terms of material possessions, Peter doesn't say what it is that the false teachers covet and want more of

Whatever it is that they desire, they see the church as potential converts who they can exploit for gain - or sheep to devour to use the analogy that Jesus used

They are the antithesis of the attitude displayed by the apostle Paul who advocated for ministers to be paid for their work but insisted on preaching the gospel for free himself

As we saw when we were going through Peter's first letter, even though it is right for the vocational minister to be paid, money should never be the motivation for a minister

Peter referred to such men as participating in "shameful gain" [**1Peter 5:2**]

And a characteristic of a false teacher is that they teach for self-gratification and enrichment - whatever form it takes

Having seen the deportment of the false teachers let's look at the disruption they cause

## **II. The disruption of the false teachers**

### **A. Many will follow their shameful ways**

The first thing we see is that many will follow their shameful ways [**2Peter 2:2a**]

Notice that Peter isn't criticizing the false teachers for simply espousing wrong doctrine; they are also guilty of wrong actions so that people won't just believe falsely but will also behave falsely

Peter uses a term that indicates behavior that is completely lacking in moral restraint; often with sexual implications

It's the kind of behavior that characterizes the pagan as Paul points out in **Ephesians 4:17-19** –

*Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.*

Peter also warns against continuing in these practices in his first letter [**1Peter 4:3**] where he writes:

*The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles [unbelievers] want to do, living in sensuality, passions, etc.*

Teachers, by nature, are role models for their students and not just purveyors of information

And gaining followers who would be like them was the goal of the false teachers

Paul warned the elders in Ephesus of this very thing in **Acts 20:29-30** when he told them:

*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, **to draw away the disciples after them.***

The whole idea of discipleship in the Christian faith is becoming more like Christ

We don't so much look to the Bible for a set propositions to believe and rules to follow but for an example to imitate

The life of a Christ-follower is an apprenticeship with Jesus as the Master

So what is taking place as a result of people following after these false teachers is a kind of anti-discipleship

Then we see that the heretics didn't just fracture the church and lead some to embrace their lifestyle; their conduct and that of those who followed after them hurt the church in the eyes of others

## **B. They will bring dishonor to the faith**

[**2Peter 2:2b**] Peter says *"the way of truth will be blasphemed"*

The word translated "to blaspheme" means to speak against someone in such a way as to harm or injure his or her reputation - it's slander

Remember, slander in the Bible doesn't have to be false - that's a more modern legal distinction

Biblical slander is simply speech that tears someone or something down - and in our case the way of truth is being maligned because of the disruption of the false teachers

When someone who is identified with the church and the way of Christ behaves in a way that society deems to be immoral, it reflects on the whole group

One of the most used epithets against Christ-followers is that of "hypocrite" and in many cases it's a fitting label because to be a hypocrite is to pretend to be something one is not or to play a part - especially when it concerns feigning virtue

How often we have seen that of late as one well-known religious leader after another has fallen prey to sinful behavior and had their misdeeds brought to light

And here we have Peter showing how false teachers will not only live lives of sensuality themselves but will also lead others to imitate them in doing the same and cause the truth to be spoken ill of presumably by those outside the church

Paul speaks of this phenomenon in **Romans 2:24** where he paraphrases Isaiah 52:5 –

*For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*

The charges that come about because of the false teachers are slanderous, not because they are untrue or false accounts of what the many were doing, but because this behavior was out of line with God's way

I would have to say that the most troubling aspect of false teachers isn't their existence because, as Peter points out God's people have always had counterfeits among them

What is most troubling is how many believers fall prey to them and buy into their false words and follow after them on the path to destruction

And it is destruction that awaits them as Peter points out next

### **III. The destruction of the false teachers**

Look at what Peter writes in the last part of verse 3 [**2Peter 2:3**]

*Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*

Perhaps one of the biggest problems with God's judgment and punishment for sin is that it isn't instantaneous

Now don't get me wrong, I'm actually very glad that God isn't sitting up in heaven playing Whack-a-Mole and smacking us down every time we sin

I am really glad that God exercises patience and forbearance and gentleness with his creatures giving us a chance to repent and reform

But delayed punishment can also lead to what we see happen among the false teachers who claim, since judgment hasn't yet happened, there will be no judgment

After all that is their claim in 3:4 [**2Peter 3:4**] isn't it?

To be "idle" means literally to stop working or to no longer be in force

But here Peter makes clear that the false teachers aren't getting away with anything and their punishment is certain

The word rendered "condemnation" here is a legal term that indicates a decision handed down in a court of law

And Peter says that the verdict was handed down long ago and that the respective punishment is coming

God is not asleep at the switch and even though we aren't told when or where this judgment was pronounced or when precisely it will be carried out, Peter's point is clear

While the false teachers are claiming all is well because everything is continuing as it always has, judgment is indeed hanging over their heads and is not far off

Their condemnation is not idle and their destruction is not asleep but, as we see in verse 1 [**2Peter 2:1**] it will come swiftly with that adjective referring to the interval of time before the judgment more than its suddenness

In other words, their destruction will be soon and, when it comes, it will last forever

And while we may think that judgment of the wicked is delayed for too long and God is being too patient with them we need to remember that we don't reckon time the same way God does

We also need to recognize that God actually desires to spare even the false teachers the judgment they have earned should they repent of their sin and turn to the Son

Peter makes this clear in 3:9 [**2Peter 3:9**] which we will look at in depth when we get to it later on

Judgment is certain and it is coming soon but God is allowing for all to repent even as many use whatever delay there is to continue to pile up offenses deserving further judgment

## Conclusion

To the degree that things have changed since Peter penned these words, I would have to say they have gotten worse and not better

False teachers are flourishing today, and the advent of ready publishing, television, and the internet has only given them a wider, more readily available audience for their falsehoods

And false teachers are every bit as dangerous as they have ever been because their tactic is to lay their false teaching alongside the truth

Like baiting a hook or trap, they give the impression that they embrace the truth of the Word of God while introducing their counterfeit message that soon replaces the truth

After all, it's far more successful to supplement or adulterate the truth and allow the falsehood to prevail over time than it is to come in openly contradicting it

### So how do we avoid becoming victims of false teachers?

The first step is to be aware of their existence and to be on guard against them, as Jesus taught in **Matthew 7:15**

But Jesus also taught in the next verse [**Matthew 7:16**] that we could recognize them *"by their fruits."*

The **first** fruit of a false prophet will be found in what they teach, and the best test of sound teaching may well be its consistency or harmony with the entire Bible

That's why Peter's primary intent in this letter is to get his readers to be more knowledgeable about God's Word

Remember, false teachers are prone to laying their falsehood alongside the truth and, as we read in **1John 4:1**, we can't believe everything we're told - even by those who we think should know

Instead, we need to test every teaching to see whether it is from God

The **second** fruit is their personal character

False teachers will typically be self-serving and self-aggrandizing - Peter calls them greedy

They will typically bristle at being questioned about their teaching - especially when their teaching is compared to other passages in the Bible that contradict it

Mark this down, a teacher of truth will never mind being honestly questioned and challenged so show how what they have said squares with other parts of the Bible

False teachers will most likely appear outwardly godly - maybe even overly so - while leading private lives of immorality

They will typically prey on the weak and vulnerable

The **third** fruit is the effect of their teaching on those who embrace it

It's inevitable that false teaching, when accepted, will result in a diminishing or even a rejection of what God's Word actually says

That will lead to an ungodly way of life - Peter referred to it as "sensual" - and their effort will then be to get others to join in their error

Watch out for those who burst onto the scene and become too popular too quickly and beware of those who come claiming a new understanding and a new way of life for the Christ-follower - they may well be wolves in sheep's clothing

The best way to spot a false teacher is by knowing the truth so well that you cannot be deceived by falsehood

Also, be aware of the condition of your own heart and its propensity to seek its own satisfaction and its willingness to hear what it wants to hear

Then keep your eyes open for those who are trying to lead you astray and pray for wisdom in discerning their error

Let's pray

**Deuteronomy 13:1-11 (page 157)**

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.

“If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter or the wife you embrace or your friend who is as your own soul entices you secretly, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods,’ which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him. But you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. And all Israel shall hear and fear and never again do any such wickedness as this among you.