

Week 9 - The Deceptions of False Teachers - 2Peter 2:18-22

Scripture Reading: Psalm 52

Introduction

There is a plant that is found in the rainforest of Australia called “Lawyer Vine”

Lawyer vine is a climber with prickly stems up to 8 meters, or 26 feet, long

While the thick stems have large thorns, the thin stems have small prickles that prove to be the most inconvenient as they hook into the clothing and skin of any passerby who brushes up against them

Lawyer vine is known colloquially as “wait-a-while” vine because anyone unfortunate enough to encounter it is going to be there for a while before freeing themselves from its clutches

It’s said that it’s the number one impediment to people trekking through the bush in Australia

I mention the lawyer or wait-a-while vine because it sounds like a kind of herbal representation of a false teacher as Peter describes them in the passage we will be considering today

Peter has just described the characteristics of the false teachers and now he turns his attention to their deceptions

And, having just written how they promise more than they can possibly deliver, he now goes on to show how they deceive others into following after them

What we need to realize is that false teachers don’t tend to come in spewing blatant falsehoods

Rather, they wrap their falsehoods in just enough truth to conceal them

And they begin by leading people to adopt their corrupt lifestyle before introducing their corrupt teaching knowing that people are more prone to adjust their doctrine to their behavior than they are to adjust the behavior to their doctrine

We see this all the time don’t we?

It’s quite sad but a church can be staunchly against a particular sin until one of their members gets entangled in it and then we often see them decide that maybe it isn’t so bad after all

So the false teachers work to entangle the unaware and once they have them in their grip, they begin to work on them to get them to rationalize and, eventually, to turn away from God’s Word

Let me encourage you to turn to 2Peter 2 so you can follow along as I read verses 17-22 [**2Peter 2:17-22**]

These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them. What the true proverb says has happened to them: “The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.”

As I told you last week, verse 17 serves as a kind of transition between Peter’s last topic and this one and our focus this morning is going to be on verses 18-22

And Peter doesn’t take his foot off the gas as he continues to use strong language to level serious charges against the false teachers

If you are taking notes, we will first see how Peter describes the deception in their ways

And then we will see their wretchedness in how they themselves are deceived

I. Their ways

In verse 18, Peter begins by telling us how the false teachers go about ensnaring their unwitting victims

A. They overwhelm

And the first thing he says that they come “*speaking loud boasts of folly*” continuing the theme from verse 17 of promising much but delivering nothing

The false teachers come with lofty speech that is as empty as it is grandiose

Because their speech is meant to muddy their message in order to confuse their hearers

Like politicians and lawyers, false teachers know how to impress an audience with their vocabulary and their verbosity

But wise listeners know that such communication is often employed for manipulation

Jude refers to this type of people as “*loud-mouthed boasters*” [Jude 16]

It’s kind of funny but he uses the same word when speaking of the false teachers that he uses when speaking of Balaam’s donkey leading me to wonder if he was showing a parallel between them

The donkey braying truth and the false teachers loudly proclaiming error

And Peter says that for the sheer volume and impressive nature of their words they have no profit in them

The word Peter uses to describe the worth of the false teachers’ teaching is “*folly*” and it means that which is unprofitable or worthless

Their words are unable to produce any spiritual benefit

Still, it wasn’t that their words lacked any content at all, but that they lacked truth

They were the verbal equivalent of “*waterless springs*” and wind-driven mists

I once heard it said about someone that they had the ability to express the least amount of thought in the greatest number of words

That would be an apt description of the false teachers

They overwhelm their subjects with an overabundance of big words

B. They lead astray

But their words are far from harmless as Peter reveals next that they lead others astray

He writes, “*They entice by sensual passions of the flesh*”

To “*entice*” means to trap by using bait

They use words to bait people to live sensually according to their physical drives in the name of God instead of encouraging them to live holy, set-apart lives for God

God has given us our physical drives and they are necessary and good

But when those drives become the motivating force in a person’s life, they are destructive

The false teachers taught an “*if it feels good, do it*” approach to life and encouraged their victims to give in to personal pleasure

Here’s a reality for you: we are open to being led astray in whatever we are prone to - wherever our desires already lie

We often think of the “*passions of the flesh*” in regards to sexual sin or other immoral acts

And, although Peter is specifically talking about licentiousness, and explicitly sexual license here, we can also be led into the opposite end of the spectrum and the sin of legalism and rule-following if that is our natural bent

There is a root of depravity in every human heart that needs very little coaxing to spring forth and it takes many forms

And, like lions who scout a pack of gazelles looking for the young or weak, the false teachers prey upon those who are most vulnerable

Peter calls their victims “those who are barely escaping from those who live in error”

Those who live in error are obviously unbelievers because the way of unbelief is error

But who are those who are barely escaping?

Escape would seem most likely to refer to salvation

So it seems that Peter is referring to brand new believers - recent escapees from error

They have found the path and determined to walk it but they aren't yet stable - they haven't fully gained their footing

And along come the false teachers with their high-sounding words and convincing arguments to lure them back into the lifestyle in which they were recently entrapped telling them that their old way of life really didn't displease God

Telling them that there would be no final judgment for anyone so eat, drink, and be merry

Paul saw this tendency in the church prompting him to write in **Romans 6:15** –

What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

It's the same error still taught today in many churches where people are told that, if they have asked Jesus into their heart, they can do as they please with the only cost being potential loss of heavenly reward

I've personally witnessed that situation as people pray “The Sinner's Prayer” and gone on to live as if nothing had changed except now, just like James Bond who has a license to kill, they now have a license to sin without consequence

That's why I emphasize submission to the lordship of Christ when presenting the gospel

But the false teachers are unrestrained by Jesus' warning in **Matthew 18:6** as they lead the vulnerable astray

C. They make empty promises

Then, in verse 19, Peter says that the false teachers entice the less stable by promising them freedom

And, like all good falsehoods, this one has just enough truth in it to make it believable

After all, **John 8:36** plainly says: *So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

So the false teachers promised complete freedom and liberation from moral restraint because they have freedom from final judgment

Their promise of freedom is invalid on its face, however, because the false teachers themselves are “slaves of corruption”

In order to make their claim of freedom from John 8:36 they had to ignore **John 8:34** where Jesus taught:

Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

Freedom from sin is not freedom to sin and true spiritual freedom in Christ is not freedom to then do as you please

It is the freedom and power to finally be able do as you should

We hold to be true the idea that every believer has the freedom to choose what his or her conscience dictates is right and then to take responsibility for their actions

Paul speaks to this quite clearly in Romans 14 and the only restraints on Christian liberty would seem to be that a Christ-follower's actions must never violate the clear teaching of Scripture or cause another to stumble

So, whatever God's Word doesn't expressly forbid, that can be done with a clear conscience, while not causing another person to stumble is permissible for the Christ-follower

That's true freedom - a freedom that the false teachers cannot offer as they focus on the liberty of licentiousness

II. Their wretchedness

Peter also reveals the wretchedness of the false teachers in three senses

A. They are slaves to sin

First, he says that they are slaves to sin

Rather than proclaiming, as Scripture does, that there can be freedom from moral depravity the false teachers were justifying the moral depravity to which they themselves are enslaved

And, while the false teachers promise freedom, they are entangled in sin, Peter writes in the middle of verse 19 - *they themselves are slaves of corruption*

And while they promise freedom from judgment, they are doomed to destruction [**2Peter 2:3**]

Peter closes out verse 19 with the maxim that whatever overcomes a person enslaves them

That serves as a warning to us to be on guard against ideas and inclinations that entice us in order to enslave us both on the individual level and as a church

Remember, falsehood and error don't come in their true dress but disguised as truth to entice and entangle and all are vulnerable to some degree to being enticed by their own tendencies

And many churches are adopting error and the enslavement that results from it by giving in to comfort or acceptance or popularity or prosperity or any number of things - I really hate to give you a list because I couldn't possibly include everything that could and should be included

B. They are in grave danger

Then, in verses 20-21, Peter makes one final, terrible point about the situation of the false teachers

He says they are in grave danger and it would have been better for them never to have heard the gospel and begun to live in accordance with it only to turn away from it

We have previously discussed how the false teachers that Peter is talking of here are not actually saved individuals

And here he makes clear that, although they knew the way of salvation and had lived according to biblical precepts for a time, they had never actually relied on Christ and been converted

They heard the gospel; they joined in with the church and took on the trappings of a Christ-follower but then, ultimately, had rejected Christ and Peter says they are therefore worse off than if they had never heard the gospel at all

I have to say that Peter's comment here seems awfully harsh

However, the author of Hebrews writes of this condition also in **Hebrews 10:26-27**

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

And Jesus taught this same concept in **Matthew 11:20-24** - let's look at those verses together

Then he [Jesus] began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."

And in Luke 12 Jesus taught that everyone will be held accountable for the knowledge they have

Look with me at **Luke 12:48** which says:

Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to who they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

True salvation is irrevocable and the future of the true believer is guaranteed nothing can separate the true child of God from the Father's love [**Romans 8:38-39**]

Peter is simply using Christian terms to describe people who appeared to be Christians for awhile

Local churches have always had unbelievers who are disguised as believers in them - that shouldn't surprise anyone

And those people will face a greater judgment because they were beneficiaries of greater light

C. They are completely corrupted

Peter says these faux believers become false teachers had once walked according to the light but became entangled again in the defilements of the world and overcome

That word, "overcome," indicates a complete defeat as in a military battle

They appeared morally pure but, eventually, they were overcome and reengaged with their former life of sin

And we see that they have become completely corrupted

In verse 20, Peter uses the word "defilement" which was used to refer to a stain or blemish on the outside while in **2Peter 1:4** he says that true followers of Christ have escaped from "corruption" which typically refers to decay on the inside

And in his next analogy he uses a proverb that expresses how the false teachers are completely corrupted

In verse 22 [**2Peter 2:22**] he writes:

"The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."

True believers are said to be new creations [**2Corinthians 5:17**]

But, in returning to their old sins, the false teachers show that their hearts were never renewed and their natures were never changed

So, like a dog they return to ingest what has corrupted them internally and, like a pig, they have returned to what corrupted them externally

Conclusion

It's all too easy to get caught up by false teachers

That's why Peter so forcefully reveals how to recognize them

For sure, we can always look to the things they teach as their infidelity to Scripture will surely be evident to those who know God's Word

But remember that their targets aren't those who are knowledgeable - they go after the weak and vulnerable

And they will rarely, if ever, come in nakedly espousing falsehood in the classroom or from the pulpit

Their first tactic will likely be to entice people to follow them in pursuing their fleshly passions because, as I pointed out earlier, once we begin to behave in a certain way we are much more prone to adjust our beliefs to match our behavior

So it is helpful to know that they can also be known by their fruits as Jesus taught in **Matthew 7:16** and that they will ultimately reveal themselves for who they are

For me, one of the most frightening characters in the Bible is Judas Iscariot

Remember, Judas walked with Jesus and the other 11 disciples for three years doing everything they did to the degree that none of them recognized that he would be the betrayer

By all appearances, he was one of them and yet, in the end, he showed that he was never truly with them

That proves that we need to be awake and aware and we need to always be watching for those who would lead us astray

Last week we saw that false teachers will tend to be daring and obstinate eschewing convention - **so watch for those who claim to have discovered new truth**

They will be animalistic speaking of things they don't understand - **so watch for those who claim to know it all**

And they will be chronic sinners who revel in pursuing their sin openly - **so watch for those whose walk doesn't match their talk**

Then, as we've seen today, they will use grandiose words to lead others astray with false promises

To be sure, there is a time and place for specialized speech and big words but **no one speaking the truth will be afraid to speak plainly so anyone can understand them**

Promising freedom that they can't deliver from within the bond of their own sin - **again, look at their lives**

Because they are enslaved and completely corrupted - time and truth walk hand in hand so be patient in observing and careful to see that their lives square with their teaching

And, absent them turning to Christ, they are in grave danger because in enticing others to their false light they will be cast into the darkest of darkness

Peter denounced the false teachers as strongly as he did because of the danger they pose to the church

And false teachers still have the power to corrupt with lofty words and empty promises

Peter's warning in this section of the letter is clear: Know how to recognize false teachers and avoid them

Let's pray

Psalm 52 (page 474)

Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man? The steadfast love of God endures all the day.

Your tongue plots destruction, like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit.

You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking what is right.

You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue.

But God will break you down forever; he will snatch and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living.

The righteous shall see and fear, and shall laugh at him, saying, "See the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction!"

But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.

I will thank you forever, because you have done it. I will wait for your name, for it is good, in the presence of the godly.