

SECOND PETER

Lesson 5

False Teachers

2 Peter 2:1-3

Would you be you be able to detect a false teacher if you heard one? “Well, of course I could,” you say. “I’m doctrinally alert.” Yet, maybe this would not be as easy as you think because false teachers are usually sly in presenting their devious doctrine. Furthermore, they are usually intelligent, attractive people with winning personalities. A new Christian or a nominal Christian with little doctrinal understanding might have difficulty picking out false teachers.

The Apostle Peter takes the whole Epistle of Second Peter to warn his Christian readers about the false teaching of Christian-Gnostics who had mixed Christianity and philosophy. These false teachers believed they had all knowledge and that no one had any truth but them. They had heady doctrine but immoral lives, and Peter warns the Christians about them.

We are told in many places in the Bible to be aware of false teachers, but one of the clearest passages is Romans 16:17-18:

“Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.”

A false teacher is an unbeliever, a counterfeit, a heretic, who teaches some heresy on the basic, primary truths of Christianity such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the humanity of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ and all true Christians, Christ’s death for sin, Christ the only way of salvation, a literal heaven and hell, the sinfulness of man, miracles, salvation by grace through faith in Christ, the bodily return of Jesus Christ to earth in His second advent, the authority of Scripture, and other fundamental doctrines.

Certain truths unite all Christians, and one cannot be a true Christian and deny any of these essentials of the Christian faith. Heresy does not have to do with secondary theological issues which separate true Christians—modes of baptism, types of church government, free grace or free will, the millennial issue, believer’s baptism or infant baptism, the tongues issue, the degree of separation, and others. Differences on secondary issues among Christians give a legitimate reason for various denominations, but all who hold to the fundamentals of the faith are in the true, universal and invisible Church of Jesus Christ. False teachers (heretics) deny the fundamentals of Christianity, and they are to be exposed and avoided. Now let us have the Apostle Peter expose false teachers for us.

THEIR MESSAGE (2:1)

“But...”

This is to be a contrast to what Peter has just told us in 1:20-21 where he talked about the true prophets of God and how their message originated from God and not man, for men were moved or carried along by the Holy Spirit when verbally proclaiming or writing Holy Scripture. However, there are always going to be false prophets along with true ones. There are going to be false teachers who give an alternative message to the truth. These false teachers are going to twist the Word of God and make it conform to their own preconceived ideas and lead many away from the truth of Jesus Christ.

What Peter is going to do is describe the deeds of the false teachers in verses 1-3 and their doom in verses 4-10.

“false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you”

In the Old Testament, there were many false prophets among the people of Israel, and there will be false teachers among the people of the Church.

“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom 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 find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you” (Deut. 13:1-5).

Our Lord warned of false Christs and false teaching. *“For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24).* They will arise among (out from within) Christian churches and groups. They will call themselves Christians, but they will be wolves in sheep’s clothing who will tear up the church on the inside.

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:28-30).

They will look good and say right sounding things, but they will be false teachers. Let’s face it, there have always been and will always be false teachers among the people of God because wherever the truth is preached, there will be the devil’s preachers with error.

In the second century Justin Martyr told of the menace of false teachers,

“And just as there were false prophets, so now there are many false teachers amongst us, of whom our Lord forewarned us to beware. Many have taught godless, blasphemous and unholy doctrines, forging them in His name; have taught, too, and still are teaching, those things which proceed from the unclean spirit of the devil.” (Dialogue with Trypho the Jew)

“who will secretly introduce destructive heresies”

The false teachers will not openly declare themselves against Christ, but they will do it secretly, meaning they bring in heresies in an underhanded way. They will couch their false teaching in biblical terminology, carefully choosing language that gives the aura of respectability of and faithfulness to the divine revelation while at the same time moving away from it. They will say, “This is the latest product of scholarly thinking. This is the most recent theological discovery.” It may appear to be in line with Scripture, but it will be slightly off, making it heresy. There will be a pretense of holding to the truth, but they will surreptitiously bring in false views.

These “destructive heresies” may seem such tiny, innocent deviations from biblical and historic Christianity, but they are really damnable heresies which bring perdition or a worthless existence in hell. False teachers always have truth mixed with error, and that is why it is so difficult to detect, whether they are Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Scientists, Unity or whatever.

The Apostle Peter says that people who follow false teachers and false teaching will end up in hell. Why? Because they have not believe the true doctrine, the true gospel of Christ as it is set forth in inspired Scripture.

The word “heresies” means “to make a choice.” A heretic is one who has made a deliberate choice not to follow the Christ of Scripture. He is someone who has chosen against biblical and historic Christianity. A true Christian, on the other hand, is one who has put himself under Christ’s authority and is not at liberty to question Christ’s teachings. A choice against Christ and His teachings is heresy and is ultimately destructive to the soul.

The Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco became well known as a church for homosexuals. The reason it was able to exist is that some simpleminded Christian a few generations ago endowed that church so that today it is totally supported. When the church was apparently sound, the endowment was made. Then, little by little, it went liberal until a heretical church was being supported by some faithful Christian’s money.

“even denying the Master who bought them”

These Christian-Gnostics denied the Master (Lord) who bought them. They were questioning Christ’s deity, lordship and sovereignty because they saw Jesus merely as a created being. They were denying either His existence, His claims or His attributes. Whatever their heresy, they made Christ less than He really was—full deity with total sovereignty over this world and universe. Therefore, the whole question of His lordship over their lives was irrelevant.

Although these false teachers called themselves Christian, and though they would often talk about Jesus’ teachings, they denied the Master because they would not subject themselves to His teachings. False teachers will not make Christ their Lord, God, Master

and King because they have a total misunderstanding of who He is and what He came to do.

In case you did not know, this is one of the most controversial passages on the extent of the atonement; that is, whether Christ died for the whole world and His death is applied only to the elect or whether He died for the elect only. A surface evaluation of the passage may indicate that Christ actually bought men in His death without actually saving them, for these false teachers “*denied the Master who bought them.*” If this interpretation be true, then the door would be open for a more universal atonement or general redemption; that is, Christ died for the whole world but His death is only applied to the elect.

We do not want to spend a lot of time on this issue, even though, in my opinion, it is an important one. My personal opinion is that Christ died for God’s elect, making a complete, perfect substitution for their sins, curse, judgment, hell and unbelief, securing their salvation forever. Limited atonement (particular redemption) affects how we view salvation, how we preach the gospel, and what methods we use in evangelism. However, the issue of limited and unlimited atonement should never divide Christians who believe in sovereign election.

The theological issue is whether Christ died to make the salvation of all men possible and nothing more (unlimited atonement, universal redemption). If so, then we have an atonement that did not actually save anyone, for it was only a hypothetical one. Did Christ die to actually and certainly save His elect people; that is, was the Father’s intention in sending the Son to save His elect? If so, then He accomplished what He intended to do and to say otherwise would necessitate God’s frustration when all are not saved as he intended (unlimited atonement).

Not one more person will be in heaven because of your belief in either limited or unlimited atonement because both views say that only the elect will be saved. Any honest interpreter of Scripture will admit there are problems with either view, but I think there are fewer problems with the view of limited atonement (particular redemption, definite atonement). It appears to me that unlimited atonement limits the power of Christ’s death, saying His substitutionary death for all men could not save all, making the Cross a mockery. Limited atonement only limits the extent of the atonement, saying that Christ’s death was not for all and that it saves all it was designed to save.

And who does Christ’s death save? It saves all who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Those who believe in limited atonement believe in making the offer of the gospel to all, the sufficiency and availability of Christ’s death saves all who will believe.

What then is the interpretation of “even denying the Master who bought them”? There are at least five possible interpretations, but I am going to give only one. It is called the Christian Charity View. Peter is speaking in accordance with the profession of these false teachers. These people were teachers in a Christian assembly and of course claimed to be Christians. They said they believed in Christ, that He bought them, so they could be in the fellowship of the Christians. They made this profession in order to give the appearance that they were bought and a part of the Christian Church. Had they said they were not bought by Christ’s blood and didn’t believe in Him as Master and God, they would have never received a hearing for their false teaching. Peter was merely taking these false teachers’ estimate of themselves at face value.

“bringing swift destruction upon themselves.”

Heretics, false teachers, shall have swift destruction. Why will they face judgment? Because they have denied truth about the person and work of Christ. This is the basic issue with every modern-day cult.

The determining factor is what is believed about Jesus Christ. Is He the Master? Is He the sovereign God? What about the Cross? Is it the basis for forgiveness and redemption? Are those in the cult subject to Christ's teachings? If not, all who follow their teachings are bringing swift destruction upon themselves.

THEIR MORALITY (2:2)

“And many will follow their sensuality”

Not only did these false teachers believe false doctrine concerning Christ, but their doctrine definitely affected the way they lived. It led them to scandalous conduct. The word “sensuality” means “dissolute practices.” It is a strong word for reckless and hardened immorality, the very antithesis of submission to Christ.

Doctrinal denial of Christ invariably leads to practical denial of Christ. It may take time for the immoral life to show up, but it will, and the rationalization for the immorality is always found in some false teaching.

The word “sensual” does not necessarily mean “sexuality” but it includes sexual immorality. Sensuality has to do with the senses. It describes people who base their lives on the here and now—what feels good, what looks good, what tastes good, what you wear, what you buy, what you drive. These things are not bad in themselves, but for sensual people they are the sum and substance of life. What matters to these people is now—cars, money, clothes, prestige, power—and they propagate this kind of lifestyle. They claim that one who follows their system will become rich, powerful and important. They present a very attractive philosophy of life, and many naive, innocent and ignorant people will follow them. Why shouldn't they? They say you can have heaven and raise hell on earth too. You can have Christ and be morally crude as well. You can have religion and a sensual way of life. Who wouldn't want to follow this kind of teaching? But this kind of teaching leads to swift destruction!

Many so-called Christian teachers are false teachers and have immoral lives to show that they never were among God's elect in Christ. For instance, the late Paul Tillich, the leading liberal theologian in the 1960's, destroyed the Christian beliefs of many young men and women. Now that Tillich is gone (and we have a pretty good idea where he has gone) the truth has come out about his personal moral life. His exploits in the bedroom with women other than his wife have made him more famous than his rotten theology.

The Roman Catholic Cardinal of France who wrote much on the relation of the Old and New Testament a few years ago died in the room of a French prostitute. Amy Simple McPherson, the famous charismatic of yesteryear, gave herself to all kinds of sexual immorality, and multiple thousands followed her. How about the Rev. Jim Jones and Jonestown? His theology led him to a life of egomania and terrible immorality, and he had followers who committed suicide for him (over nine hundred of them), but they were following a false teacher.

Now I'm not saying that all these folks are not saved (only God knows this), but they are people who held faulty viewpoints on the person and work of Christ, and their false teaching or bad theology led to immorality. False teachers lead many astray.

“and because of them the way of truth will be maligned”

False teachers, with their bad doctrine and immoral lives, give Christianity a black eye. People mock Christ and blaspheme Christianity because of so-called Christian leaders who teach false doctrine and/or live immoral lives. Many people will be turned off to true Christianity because of these false teachers.

In the liberal seminaries around the world, young men and women are being told that Jesus is not God, that the Bible is a collection of myths and fables, that supernaturalism does not exist, that the second advent is not going to happen, that Jesus Christ was a human sinner who needed to be redeemed.

And the worst heresy that is being propagated today is that of universalism; that is, ultimately all men are going to be saved; there is no eternal hell; God is so loving that He would not judge anyone. Each year hundreds of young ministerial minds are being sent into neo-evangelical liberal denominations who have been trained in heresy in their seminaries. It is no wonder that the unsaved world has little or no use for the organized church.

I read recently about a seminary that had gone liberal that was teaching a course on the Apostles' Creed. They taught how the students could recite it but not believe it. They actually were teaching them to lie. Such is the mind that leaves the Holy Scriptures as authority.

THEIR METHOD (2:3)

“and in their greed they will exploit you with false words”

These false teachers are in the ministry for the money. Religion is a big business, a racket, and there is fabulous money to be made in it if a man or woman knows the psychology of the manipulation of people. False teachers tell people what they want to hear. They flatter them with words that build their egos. They always want their hearers to feel good. They exploit people in order to rob them of their money.

False teachers know how to appeal to basic human nature. The word “false” is from the Greek word *plastos* from which we get our English word “plastic.” False teachers mold, bend and stretch words to please their hearers. They will never offend anyone because they want to line their own pockets with money.

“their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

God has declared that He will judge false teachers and all their followers. He will bring destruction upon those who hold false doctrine and practice sensuality as a lifestyle. This judgment is certain and God is not asleep. It is coming.

Notice that three times in three verses Peter has mentioned “destruction” (perdition, damnation). He was not a universalist. To believe in apostolic doctrine is to believe in eternal judgment for all who do not have Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

CONCLUSION

What lessons are Christians to learn from this section of Scripture? First, false teachers will arise in the midst of the true Church and when they do we must not tolerate their doctrine, no matter how intelligent, attractive and sweet it may sound. Second, to follow false teachers and heresy is to bring eternal destruction to all who do so because one can only be saved by right content in the true gospel. Third, the theology one holds definitely affects how he lives, and true Christian doctrine leads to a life of morality rather than sensuality. Fourth, as Christians we should give our monies to true teachers of the Word and to Christian organizations committed to Christ and the fundamental truths of Christ and Scripture.

Do you think you can detect a false teacher now? I hope so. However, the best cure for false teaching is a positive preaching of the Word of God, and we are told this in Scripture.

“I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

Are you a non-Christian? Are you impressed with groups like the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses or Christian Scientists? Do you go along with liberal preachers in so-called respectable Christian churches who say that Jesus is not God, the Bible is full of errors, and we are all headed for heaven even if we do not believe what Jesus taught? If you do, the Bible says you are following false teachers, and if you do not turn to Christ and His teachings, your destiny will be the same as the false teachers—eternal destruction.

Jesus taught that He alone is the way to heaven. *“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.’” (John 14:6).*

Will you believe Christ, submit to His teachings on sin, judgment, hell, salvation, faith, repentance and eternal life, or will you believe false teachers, submit to their destructive heresies and end up in perdition? There are just two roads—false teaching which leads to hell and true teaching in Christ, which leads to heaven. Which will you choose?