

August 27, 2023
Faith in Exile – Character of False Teachers
2 Peter 2:10-16
Vernon Advent Christian Church

[Intro]

As we've seen over the past few weeks, when Peter wrote about the false teachers of his day, he used intense language that may seem a little strong for us. And because of this, 2 Peter is said to be one of the most neglected books in the whole Bible, right up there with the book of Leviticus, as we tend to not spend time in the things that we don't like. Maybe some of you came in this morning and after seeing the title and topic of the sermon thought to yourselves, "are we really going to talk about false teachers again?" The answer is yes, and again next week and following because the whole theme of 2 Peter is essentially a warning from Peter to these exiles, as he says in 2:1, about false teachers who are introducing "destructive heresies," that were prevalent in the early church. But in the wonderful way in which the Word of God speaks to every age, I think we'll discover, although with sadness, that the kind of nonsense that was pervasive at the time Peter was writing this letter is something that is all too well known to us even today.

The false teaching Peter seems to be addressing is a mixture of skepticism and immorality. These people were skeptical about the reality of the return of Jesus, which we will look at in the coming weeks; and they were skeptical about the reality of God's judgement, which Pastor Bruce spoke about in our passage last week. When skepticism begins to creep into the mindset of men and women, then immorality will inevitably follow. And this is what Peter is addressing here.

Last week we closed in vs. 9 and the first half of vs. 10 of Ch. 2 with the picture of God's rescuing and keeping of his children from trials and the inescapable judgement of the ungodly as we are told that God is "keeping the unrighteous for the day of judgment," a reminder that God is sovereign and in control of all things. And this is "especially true" of these false teachers who, Peter says, "indulge in the lust of defiling passion" and who "despise authority."

And this is where we pick up with our passage today as we continue to look at the character of these false teachers. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the Word of God.
[Read Passage]

Now, everything that Peter has in mind here cannot be completely known to us, because he is writing about specific circumstances and to specific people who were obviously known to him. But while we may not know the specific details of the issues he talks about, the general message is clear. Notice the terms he uses as he describes these false teachers, "bold and willful," "blasphemous," they are "irrational animals," or as some translations have it as "brute beasts." In vs. 13, he says they are "blots and blemishes," and then calls them "accursed children" at the end of verse 14 just to name a few. And you find yourself saying, "Peter, tell us exactly how you're feeling about these folks."

As we've read this letter so far, possibly you have found yourself wondering at times: "Does he have to be so graphic? Does he have to be so forceful?" But if you put yourself in the place of a parent and imagine these folks moving among your own children and drawing them away, teaching them dangerous lies and introducing them to filthy practices, there is not a parent among us who does not understand the emotions to defend your children and to throw out these

false teachers immediately and forcefully. Now, hold on to that thought, because this is exactly why we need to cover such passages even though they are not the most enjoyable. Peter knew his responsibility was that of shepherding the sheep under his care, just as it is the responsibility of Pastor Bruce and myself to spiritually shepherd you all. And these wolves were moving among the sheep, and so Peter is dealing with them in this very dramatic fashion. And it is our goal to learn from Peter's warning to his readers so that we too can be aware of the dangers of false teaching and how to recognize them.

Notice that the slander of these individuals knows no limits at all, as Peter says in vs. 10-12 that their blasphemy is unhindered. Vs. 12 even tells us they "blaspheme in matters in which they are ignorant." In other words, as Alistair Begg says of these false teachers when he spoke on this passage, "they are so far out there when it comes to denying [the truth of God's Word] that they are beyond the realm of their own capacity to fathom what they're saying." Peter is painting a graphic picture for us here. His point is these men behave like animals. They don't exercise the restraint of the angels which he refers to in vs. 11, which means even the angels know all authority lies in the complete sovereignty of God. They choose instead to be "creatures of instinct." They neglect rational thought. They operate purely on the basis of sensual gratification based in their own greed. And Peter tells us again in vs. 12, in the end, just like animals "born to be caught and destroyed," God himself will deal with them and they will be put down.

Now it's important to remember, what we're describing here are men living in the first century, who had wives and children, were neighbors and members of their community, and their parents, some of whom would have been Christians, would no doubt have been concerned about their well-being. They were individuals with real souls who had slowly but surely turned their backs on the truth and loveliness and all goodness, and they found themselves now in the most awful of messes.

While it is good for us to see the human side of things, before we start to feel too bad for these folks, we are not talking about true believers that may have fallen prey to a false teaching or an error in theology for we are all still human and still possess a fallen nature. But the true believer has the discerning power of the Holy Spirit living within them and when confronted with the error of our ways, we will yield to the Spirit's correction and repent. But that's not what's going on here. These individuals "boldly" and "willfully," as we're told in vs. 10, decided that they have found a new path apart from God's truth and, when confronted with the error of their ways, show their lack of true faith by arrogantly boasting and continuing in their lies. That's why in vs. 13, Peter goes on to say, "They will be paid back for the harm they have done," and they will be destroyed.

The problem is that much of the church has given into the worldview of our culture that no one is right in speaking like this about anyone. Nobody is allowed to say the things in such strong language as Peter does here. Oh, we may mention that we disagree with something, or someone, either socially or theologically, but it is usually done in the company of likeminded friends or sugar coated enough that if it is said out loud it won't offend anyone. And it's because we know that anyone who would dare to say such things about any group of people or any individual is thought to be out of bounds of the social norms and we run the risk of being labeled a "bigot," which has become the go to word to call someone you don't agree with. And this is one of the great challenges that we face in our time. If we're going to hold true to what the Bible says, if we're going to stand for righteousness and for truth, then we are increasingly going to be on the receiving end of that kind of response. The question is do we have the boldness of Peter?

Do we have the courage to be a biblical Christian? To be so grounded in the truth of scripture that we stand on it and proclaim it no matter what.

Well, we definitely need the power of God to speak the truth with love. Surely that is the only way that Peter was able to do what he did. Look at how he keeps going as he continues. These individuals are doing these things not behind closed doors, but they're doing them "in broad daylight." They are totally unashamed. "They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime." (v. 13) The loss of shame in our culture today is undeniable. I mean, it is impossible to scroll through social media or flip through the channels on your tv and not be confronted by the fact that people love "reveling" in broad daylight. I could give you all kinds of examples outside of the church of these types of things that are happening in our world today, but more pertinent to what Peter is referring to here, is what's happening inside the church. The obvious examples I could point to are the rainbow flags flying outside of church buildings or even false promise of the church in the next town over with the interfaith sign out front that reads "God's doors are open to all," both implying that we can believe and live how we want as long as we're good people and God will accept us. But what about the more subtle examples? Turn on TBN and count how many times you hear things like "sow your seed of faith" (which means give money) and you will receive a blessing in the form of some sort material wealth. Or send in your monthly gift and you will receive a "prayer cloth" that has been anointed by "fill in the blank televangelist" and you have the promise of your own physical healing. Or how about the faith healer's of the world, who "heal" every headache and earache on stage with all the cameras watching, all the while there are families left behind the cameras who sold everything they had to get to the massive arena for these healing services because they were told that their children with real debilitating diseases could be healed only to be told that there's no time for them. All of this done out in the open and never called out. You see the danger of these types of false teachings is what if I "sow my seed of faith" and I don't receive the material blessing that was promised? Or I send in my money to receive the prayer cloth I'm told will heal my cancer but it remains? Or the parents with a special needs child who bring their child to a faith healer only to be turned away because apparently the healing is only good for toothaches and carpal tunnel and not for down syndrome and cerebral palsy? Then what these people are left with are questions about the goodness of God or if he exists at all. The truth is the Bible never promises that every Christian will be wealthy, only that God will provide all our needs. Likewise, the Bible never promises that every Christian will be healed of every disease and sickness, only that God is able to heal, has purpose for all things and that everything will be made whole when Jesus comes again. The twisting of these truths is one of the most cruel things that is done in the name of Christ because it is done not for the glory of God but for self-gratification and greed.

That's why Peter says of these false teachers that, "they are blots and blemishes," literally a stain on the reputation of the Church and on Christ. You see the Bible uses the picture of a bride on her wedding day, dressed in pure white, to describe the Church as we eagerly await the return of Christ. Peter, himself, does this in the next chapter of this letter in 3:12-14, where he says, "In light of the fact that Jesus is coming back again, you should live holy and godly lives, and you *shouldn't* be marked by blots and blemishes. You should be found without spot and blameless on the day of his return." Peter's point is that false teaching of any kind is a "black eye," or a "stain," if you will, on the Church. The good news for the Church, and bad news for these false teachers, is that God will remove those stains through judgement so that what is left is a pure and spotless bride beautifully adorned for her husband.

Peter continues in vs. 13, and they “revel,” or “delight,” in their deceptions while they feast with you.” (v.13) Again, their arrogance is on full display here. Not only were they not hiding, but they were present in the church even participating in the love feasts that the early church was known for.

And vs. 14 describes them as having, “eyes full of adultery and insatiable for sin,” meaning they can never get enough and they are in constant pursuit of innocent people who will fall for their dirty tricks. Reminds me of these telephone scammers. They sound so genuine and they’re so convincing, and before you know it you have given them everything they need all based on their lies. Church, we need to be on alert against such things in regards to false teaching. That’s what verse 14 is saying: “With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning;” and they’re always on the lookout for those who are susceptible to their plans to satisfy their greed. And what’s more the verse goes on to say, “their hearts have been trained in greed.” The picture here is an athlete that has trained for the event in which he is going to participate in. In the same way, Peter describes these false teachers as making a sport of deceiving people for financial gain. So the implicit warning here is that we need to be on guard against such things.

The question then becomes, “How in the world does all this come about? What happened that would cause these folks to go off track? Vs. 15 tells us they have “forsaken the right way.” Which means that they once were on the right track, but somewhere along the way they decided that their way was better. The Bible says in Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”

When Kathleen and I were first married and I was in seminary at GCTS on the north shore of Boston, we took the opportunity to travel back down to Lancaster, PA for homecoming weekend at our alma mater, Lancaster Bible College. My brother was with us who was also a student at the seminary and a graduate of LBC, and we set off on the trip that we had taken countless times before. And it’s still the same route I take when traveling up and down the east coast so to say I know the route would be an understatement. However, you need to remember these were the days before GPS and we had left later in the day so for much of the time we were traveling in the dark. Somewhere along the way, after being caught up in the conversations of the car ride, I began to think that my surroundings were not looking familiar and we began looking at the exit signs and comparing them to our road atlas, remember them, and soon discover that we had missed our turn and were driving out into the New York state countryside, now in the complete wrong direction, instead of south toward PA. The real gut punch for a bunch of poor students living on chicken nuggets and pasta was that the only way back to where we needed to be on time was to get to the Pennsylvania Turnpike which is a toll road and costs us more than then what we should have ended up paying for the whole trip.

Isn’t this what Peter is talking about in this passage? The thing that should absolutely stop us in our tracks is to know the message of 2 Peter is not a rebuke against false teachers, but it is a warning to the Church. To paraphrase Peter’s conclusion in Ch.3 which we will get to, he says, “Therefore my friends, you know this stuff.” But listen: “Be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.” They “left the right way.” They simply slipped off. They should have stayed on the right road theologically, morally, and spiritually speaking. The difference is, when we discovered we were lost that night we sought help from the map and found our way back. Peter describes these false teachers as ones who have deliberately chosen to go the wrong way and are arrogantly happy to continue doing so and, what’s more egregious, they are looking for others to take with them.

The last description of the character of these false teachers that Peter gives is that not only have they left the right way, but “they have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing.” Balaam son of Beor is a non-Israelite prophet that we read about in the OT in the Book of Numbers Chs. 22-24. He attempted to curse Israel in exchange for the money and honor of the frightened king of Moab, Balak. To make matters worse, after God thwarts the plans of the king, Balaam then leads the Israelites into sinful acts with the Moabite women, bringing with it God’s judgment, and we’re told 24,000 of them were killed. Putting all this together gives a clear view of how history, and more importantly, scripture remembers Balaam. Like Balaam, Peter is comparing the false teachers of his day to this attitude that says one can be fully cooperative with the world (acting on behalf of the Moabite King) and still serve God (as a prophet). The “doctrine of Balaam,” as it has been called, teaches compromise, wanting Christians to forget they are called to be separate and holy and makes believers indistinguishable from the unbelieving world. It is a belief that “a little sin” doesn’t hurt, especially if there’s some financial or personal benefit involved, the ends justify the means if you will, which is the trap that most false teachers fall into today. And in the same way, these false teachers were seeking to seduce believers in Peter’s day with their perverted nonsense and a hedonistic lifestyle.

And what’s more, we’re told in vs. 16, that Balaam’s donkey had a better grasp of what was going on than Balaam did himself! If you remember in his story in Numbers 22, Balaam was riding his donkey and on his way to curse Israel when God sent an angel to block his way. Apparently unable to see the angel and angry that his donkey wouldn’t go any further, Balaam began to beat the donkey with a rod because of his perceived stubbornness. Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey and it spoke to Balaam and together with the angel of the Lord revealed to him that if he had continued down the path the Lord would have killed him. He was on the path to his own doom and it took a “dumb donkey” to call him out and “restrain his madness.” Peter is making the case that the false teachers in the church are just like Balaam. They cannot see what would be obvious to even a barnyard animal because they are blinded by their own madness. And God’s judgment is waiting on their path.

We know that within the church, there will always be false teachers. And we know that it can be hard to tell the difference between what is true from what is false, because of their cunning deceptions which makes it all the more important for us to study and know the true Word of God. When blatant disobedience emerges in the church, then we must be bold to call it out. Peter has implied in our passage that we are to have nothing to do with such people. And therefore, we must examine ourselves and hold fast to Christ.

Again, I ask you to imagine these false teachers walking among your children, ensnaring them and enticing them to follow them down the path that leads to destruction. Wouldn’t you do everything in your power to secure your children on the path of righteousness? That is all that Peter is doing here. He’s looking out for his children, the sheep in his care. And you don’t have to be particularly bright to recognize that if this was a message for the early church, it is surely a message for the church today as we eagerly await our blessed hope, the Lord’s appearing. So let us pay attention to the warnings we have been given to watch out for false teachers and stay on the righteous path. But this takes faith, faith in exile.