

Feed My Sheep, 1 & 2 Peter: Lesson 11

False Teachers

Memory Text: “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage.” (2 Peter 2:19)

Setting The Stage: We begin by acknowledging not just the possibility of false teaching, but the certainty of it. We should not be surprised to find false teaching in the church today. Jesus and his apostles are very clear that false teachers will arise. They “promise” it. As Jesus says, “For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.” (Matthew 24:24)

Likewise, Paul warns the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:29-31) and his protégé Timothy (2 Timothy 4:3, 4) that false teaching is sure to come. To the Thessalonian believers, Paul spoke about the man of sin being revealed before Jesus return. And then in Revelation, John tells that the masses will be led astray by a gigantic false religious system and as a result will be eternally lost.

If we had any doubts at this point, Peter joins the refrain to add another voice: “There will be false teachers among you.” (2 Peter 2:1) The early church wasn’t exempt from the ravishes of falsehood. Sadly, false teachers/prophets would continue right up until the return of Jesus. So, we shouldn’t be caught off guard that false teachers have arisen throughout church history and will multiply in our day.

Sunday / False Prophets & Teachers

2 Peter 2:1-3, 10-22; Matthew 7:15-20

2 Peter 2:1-3. Peter reminds his readers of details they were likely familiar with – that there were false prophets in abundance in the OT period (see Jer. 14:13). Later he refers to an a prime example of a false prophet – Balaam. And just as there had been false prophets, there would arise false teachers.

The future tense indicates that perhaps they had not yet arisen among those whom Peter is writing to, but in vv. 10-22 both present and future tense are used indicating that they’re doing their destructive work elsewhere at that time. Peter distinguishes between a false prophet and a false teacher. The first claims to deliver God’s message from God Himself; the second, to interpret the message.

Peter highlights some of the heresies promoted by the false teachers – denial of the Lord (v. 1), immoral teachings (v. 10, 18), and turning from the holy commandment (v. 21). Looking at the false teachings, one doesn’t have to wonder why Peter used strong language to denounce them.

“False teachers are not just false in their teaching, but also in their living.”

Matthew 7:15-20: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”

Jesus says it twice so that we won’t miss it: You will recognize them by their fruits. His warning may sound clear and simple at first, but as we all know, trees don’t bear fruit overnight. Eventually, however, the fruit (or lack thereof) will be manifest. And so it is with ethical compromise. They will be known by their fruit – not the fruit of ministry quantity and numbers, but quality and endurance – and ultimately the quality of their own lives.

In particular, 2 Peter 2 is remarkable in how it fleshes out Jesus’ warning about the fruit of false teaching. We can boil it down to three essential categories – and all three are about character and conduct:

1. Pride, or defying authority (v. 1, 10) “Denying the Lord” – It’s without a doubt that Peter must have mused on his own experience of denying Jesus and what grief it brought him (see also Jude 4). It’s one thing to betray someone (and that’s bad enough), but to betray the Lord who bought you with His own blood is another!
2. Sensuality, which typically means sexual sin – (v. 2) “Many will follow their destructive ways [sensuality].” (see also vv. 10, 12–14, 19)
3. Greed, for money and material gain – (v. 3) “In their covetousness [greed] they will exploit you” (see also vv. 14, 15). “In covetousness” – Covetousness is the motivation from which the false teachers work to deceive and extract wealth from the unwary. Apparently, these false teachers pretended to have secret knowledge and persuaded believers to give them money in exchange for it, therefore revealing their true motives. The false teachers were trading with the souls of their victims, selling them false doctrine for their gifts. But God hasn’t forgotten about their end. The sentence long ago decided by God isn’t a dead letter or inactive. It will come.

Again and again, Peter’s descriptions relate to greed, sensuality, and pride – or money, sex, and power. What false teachers throughout history have shared in common is not the specific nature of their doctrinal error, but the inevitability of moral compromise in one of these three general areas.

Another way to see it is that their falseness comes out in sin against themselves, against others, or against God. In their greed, they fleece the flock for material gain. Or in their lust, they compromise sexually (whether fornication, adultery, or

homosexuality, which 2 Peter 2 suggests). Or in their pride, they “despise authority” (2 Peter 2:10), and the greatest authority, who upholds all authorities, is God Himself.

Monday / Freedom In Christ?

2 Peter 2:18, 19; Matthew 18:6; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:13; Romans 6:18

2 Peter 2:18, 19. “Great swelling words” or “over-swollen matters”. That would be extravagant, bombastic speech, with philosophical words sprinkled in the mix (likely Gnosticism). The false teachers grandiose words, philosophical arguments, and sensual allurements were directed at those who had only just come out of these things into Christianity. Would Jesus’ words have special import for these false teachers who target new babes in Christ?

Matthew 18:6: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.” One of the most difficult things for me to witness is seeing new believers get swept up in false teachings having just accepted the truth...

“Promise them liberty” – It’s clear that these false teachers tried to make it appear as though the new believers would be free from all unnecessary restrictions. But sadly, the liberty they promised was lawless license, not true Christian freedom. What is that great liberty all Christians should possess? Liberty from sin.

2 Corinthians 3:17: “Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”

Galatians 5:13: “Or you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

Romans 6:18: “ And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” All Christians should possess liberty from sin

The false teachers were incapable of helping anyone else onto a higher moral plane, since they themselves were shackled to sensual vice. Although they didn’t know it, sin had conquered them and they had become slaves. How could they offer true liberty to others?

Tuesday / A Dog Returns To Its Vomit

2 Peter 2:17-22

2 Peter 2:17-22. False teachers are likened to wells without water and clouds carried by a tempest. They promised to refresh the spiritually thirsty, but they couldn’t offer living water. They claimed to bring light, but all they could deliver was darkness, preventing these young Christians from seeing where they were

going. On top of that, the false teachers instruction was inconsistent under the control of his/her feelings and passions.

These verses reveal that an experiential knowledge of Jesus – a saving relationship with Him – has the efficacy to liberate a sinner and transport him/her out of the darkness and corruption of sin. A mere head knowledge about Jesus would never accomplish that. But a close walk with Him does.

But having experienced the peace, the presence, the righteousness of God, if a person decides to go back to their former life, will they be better or worse off? Like the gladiators of old who in combat became enmeshed in each others nets, so believers who yield to worldly allurements will become hopelessly entangled and easily defeated. Knowing the truth and experiencing it, then turning from it makes a person become spiritually hardened and less responsive to spiritual appeals. His/her salvation thus becomes more difficult to accomplish.

It's so dangerous that Peter says that it would have been better if they hadn't known the way of righteousness at all and been like someone hearing the stirring gospel message for the first time and being susceptible to responding to it. Instead, they are like a dog who has returned to its own vomit (Prov. 26:11) and a clean sow returning to the mire.

Wednesday / Peter & Jude

2 Peter 2:1-3:7; Jude 1:4-19

There are tremendous similarities between 2 Peter 2:1-3:7 and Jude 1:4-19. In fact, it seems as if one is repeating the other. We know from our personal study of the Bible that if something is repeated then it is to be seen as God seeking to get our undivided attention on the matter. What are the similarities between the two passages?

1. Jude 4 = 2 Peter 2:1-3, 18, 19 (false teachers creeping into the church to lead God's people toward transgression)
2. Jude 6 = 2 Peter 2:4 (fallen angels reserved for the day of judgment)
3. Jude 7, 8 = 2 Peter 2:6 (the destruction of Sodom)
4. Jude 11 = 2 Peter 2:15 (the error of Balaam)
5. Jude 15 = 2 Peter 3:7 (judgment of the wicked)

Both passages are clear that God is in control of the destiny of the wicked and the He is closely monitoring evil. Whether unrighteous people or fallen angels, God has taken special note of their evil and has planned their punishment on the day of judgment.

What were the sins that would bring sure punishment? They included introducing destructive heresies, despising authority, enslavement to sin, lawlessness, denying

Jesus as Lord, defiling their bodies, speaking empty and boastful words, and slandering (false accusation to damage a persons reputation).

Interestingly, these descriptions don't include violent acts or other wicked atrocities that often outrage us. Instead, they describe more subtle sins, sins that are often overlooked in the church. That fact should awaken us to our great need of genuine repentance and reformation.

Thursday / More Old Testament Lessons

2 Peter 2:6-16

2 Peter 2:6-16. What other examples does Peter refer to that provides warning of results of evil?

“The first substantive reference to Sodom in the Bible is Genesis 13:12, 13. Lot and Abraham decided to separate for “financial” reasons. Lot chose the Jordan valley and “pitched his tent toward Sodom” (Gen.13:12). The Bible then comments, “Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord” (Gen. 13:13, NRSV).

“Later, when God warned Abraham that He was planning to destroy Sodom, Abraham negotiated an agreement that God would not destroy it if ten righteous people were found there (Gen. 18:16–33). The unlikelihood of finding even ten righteous people in Sodom was amply demonstrated by what happened to the messengers sent to visit Lot. The city was duly destroyed; only Lot and his two daughters escaped (Gen. 19:12–25).

“Peter derives two lessons from this story. First, the two cities provide an example of the punishment coming to the ungodly (2 Pet. 2:6). Second, it shows that the Lord knows how to rescue the righteous from trial (2 Pet. 2:7–9).

“Peter then notes some of the characteristics of those who were destroyed at Sodom and Gomorrah: they indulge their flesh in depraved lust, despise authority, are bold and willful, and do not hesitate to slander the angels (2 Pet. 2:10, 11). These characteristics have similarities to how Peter describes the false teachers and their followers.

“The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22:1–24:25. He had been hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse the Israelites. At first reluctant, he was eventually persuaded to take on this task by the offer of a larger sum of money (Num. 22:7–21). On his way he was confronted by an “angel of the Lord” and was saved from death only when his donkey turned aside. Balaam then beat his donkey and realized his mistake only when his eyes were opened and he saw the “angel of the Lord” himself (Num. 22:22–35). In the end, Balaam ended up blessing Israel (Num. 23:4–24:24). Peter used Balaam as an example of those enticed by adultery and greed (2 Pet.

2:14, 15). Such people are like Balaam. They have left the path that they should follow.” (Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, 2 Peter, p. 95)

Appeal: Think about all that we have been given, both in the Bible and in the writings of Ellen G. White. Thus, why can we as Seventh-day Adventists never say that we haven't been warned?