

On This Rock¹ Part Eleven *2 Peter 2, pt. 1*

Would you recognize false teaching and preaching if you heard it? How would you know? And if the preaching is *not* false, is it okay if the preacher's lifestyle doesn't match up with what he or she is preaching? Along those lines, we know that everyone is flawed to some degree, so what will be the standard for *how much* of a preacher's life should back up his or her preaching, and if it doesn't, how much is okay? Those are questions Peter addresses in his second letter.

We've been in our series called "On This Rock," going through Peter's letters in the New Testament, and today we are in 2 Peter 2. In both letters, Peter has been "hinting" at some false teachers, but now he gets a little negative, and rightly so; he doesn't have anything good to say about them. Remember, the time of Peter writing this would have been between 65-68 AD, so the church had been around for only 30 years or so, and yet false teachers had already become a problem. People were distorting the words of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles in order to manipulate and control people, and, ultimately, squeeze them out of their money. Just like today, there were a lot of different preachers preaching a lot of things that were different from the revealed Word of God. That's why some of the New Testament epistles were written: to defend truth against error – like Galatians, 1 John, and 2 Peter, and Jude. Today I want to give us an overview of false teachers from this chapter, and then next week we'll dive a little deeper into a more detailed look at chapter two. So I'm not going to read chapter two for you; I would strongly encourage you to read it after we're done. I will make reference to some of the verses, though, so you might want to take notes and write down the references or download the manuscript from our website so you can spend more time in your own study later.

I do want to mention that I'm grateful to Pastor Steve May for letting me borrow from his teaching on this. Credit where credit is due!

But let me give some overall observations before we look at the bad guys. First, when you read chapter two, you'll see that Peter is not very specific about *what* exactly these guys are teaching. That's interesting, because several times in the gospels Jesus challenges the Pharisees point-by-point. In Galatians, Paul does the same with the Judaizers, as does John with the Gnostics in his first epistle. Peter, however, is a little vague. He gives a few clues, but he doesn't get specific. There's a reason for this. False teaching, throughout the ages, has taken different forms and varying content, but it tends to follow the same pattern. In chapter 2 Peter gives us the pattern for knowing how to recognize—and how to avoid

¹ From a sermon by Steve May, "Is Our Church a Healthy Church?"

being misled by—false teachers. The idea here is not only being able to spot them, but making sure that we don't act like they act.

So I think it is important to say that false teachers are not the focus of our ministry at West Valley Church.

Under the very broad label of "Christianity" there are many churches (most, I would say) with whom we agree on all the *major*, fundamental tenets of the faith: the authority of Scripture, the Lordship of Christ, humanity's separation from God by sin, the atoning death of Jesus, and his bodily resurrection. These are the major fundamentals. Now, there are a few *minor* differences we have with some churches, but we agree on the major issues. The differences are important to us, but they aren't significant enough to say that we or they are not Christians. This applies to the majority of Christian churches in existence throughout the world. As for the differences, John Wesley, a key theologian to us and founder of the original Methodist Church, used to quote St. Augustine who said, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Any church or group that teaches things that are outside the circle of orthodox Christianity should be suspect. For instance, whenever a group says that they believe only *their* version of the Bible is correct—even though it is different than every other translation in existence – then that's a warning light. Or, if they don't believe in the divinity of Jesus, or in his atoning death, or in his bodily resurrection.

We could probably name names of groups that fit into this category, but that's not the point. But since they fall under the category of false teaching, should it become our mission to put them out of business? Some Christians completely define themselves by who they're *against*, whether cults or other denominations or world religions or whatever.

What then, *are* we called to do? We're called to share the gospel, to make disciples, to serve others in the name of Jesus—feeding the poor, ministering to the sick, loving the lost, making disciples, and glorifying Jesus. Nowhere in this entire chapter devoted to recognizing false teachers does Peter say, "You need to argue with these guys, and you need to preach against them." There are those who, in different ways, bring dishonor to the name of Christ, but attacking them will not be the focus of West Valley Church's ministry. Instead, *our focus will be doing the work of Jesus.*

Another thing to note is that God will ultimately take care of the situation. God is aware of who the false teachers are, and he will take care of them. He's also aware of who the righteous teachers are, and he's taking care of them, too. That's why Peter uses the examples in this chapter of how God punished the wicked in the Old Testament. Peter makes the point that God will take care of the false teachers in verses 2, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 17. Part of Peter's point here is that God is well aware of the damage that can be done by false teachers, and *He* is taking care of it. We don't need to try to do God's job for him. Let's just do *our* job--what he's called us to do--and let him take care of the bad guys.

Finally, it's important to note that most of the characteristics of false teachers have to do with *character*, not *theology*. Now, Peter *did* warn against their "destructive heresies" — in other words, their teachings that can lead you astray—but most of what Peter says applies to what the teachers *do*, not what the teachers *believe*. That means that under the broad umbrella of the label "Christian" there are a number of teachers and preachers whose

theology may not be necessarily suspect, but whose behavior *is* like that of the false teachers. When it comes to ministry, bad character spawns bad theology. There are preachers who started in the right place theologically, but their teaching has become unreliable because of the compromising way they do ministry.

In these last few minutes we'll look at what Peter says are the characteristics of false teachers. By the way, I'd encourage you to compare this to the pastors and leaders here at West Valley Church. I think you'll see that we are working hard to make sure we don't fall into these categories.

Alright, some characteristics of false teachers are...

1. An exaggerated emphasis on money. (v. 3)

False teachers are motivated by greed. In verse 14 Peter says, "They are experts in greed." The Greek word translated greed means, literally, "lust for more." Just because a pastor preaches about money doesn't make him or her a false teacher. Let me say this: it *is* important for pastors to preach about money – when it pertains to people being responsible with their resources, and when it's about carrying out the mission and ministry of the church. That's what we are doing with our **Here For Good** campaign, in order to get rid of our mortgage, moving money from mortgage to ministry, and then renovating and updating some older parts of our facility. Peter is *not* referring to money used for the purposes of ministry; he's referring to teachers who collected big offerings and spent them on a lavish lifestyle. There were many then and there are now. We need to ask ourselves, "What is our motivation?" Is it the lust for more--more money, more glory, and more recognition? Or is it the desire to bring the peace of Jesus into the lives of others?

Another characteristic of false teachers is...

2. A refusal to submit to authority. (v. 10)

False teachers have a tendency to set themselves up as the supreme rule in their ministries; they tend to hoard all the power for themselves. Remember what I said a few weeks ago about pastors who become spiritually abusive, trying to control the behaviors of people in the church.

You've heard the saying, "Absolute power destroys absolutely." It's true, especially in Kingdom work. A good rule of thumb is to trust no one who answers to no one. Every pastor *must* be accountable. I am accountable to my district and general leadership, and to the church board you elect. The pastors on our pastoral team are accountable to me and to the church board and district and general leaders as well.

Even our U.S. government is *supposed* to be designed with checks and balances to guarantee a balance of power, and we must make sure our ministry is, too. I guess it's okay for presidents to live differently than what they claim, but that doesn't work for pastors.

Just know that no one person gets their way all the time here; we all yield to the leadership of the various groups who oversee different areas of ministry. No one person calls all the

shots here, even though, if necessary, I make the final call, but even then, it's not without consultation with the pastors. This is the way it should be. We are called to submit to one another as we do to the Lord.

Another characteristic of false teachers is...

3. They don't walk the talk. (v. 10, 14)

One scholar says that the words in the Greek are not as mild as they sound in English. He says, "Peter piles up some very strong words; a literal rendering is 'going after flesh in a passionate longing for defilement.' The reference is to sexual sin..."²

Another scholar tells us this phrase is, literally, "with eyes full of an adulteress" — meaning that these people see in every person an opportunity to satisfy their lusts. In other words, they view members of the opposite sex as mere objects.

4. They are outside the mainstream of Christian thought and fellowship. (v. 15)

Peter talks about Balaam who was an Old Testament prophet who came perilously close to selling out Israel for the sake of money – until he was rebuked by his donkey. False teachers sell out Christianity for their own selfish gain; they've left the straight way and have wandered from the truth. In other words, they are outside the mainstream of Christian thought. These people claim that they are right and everyone else is wrong. I get suspicious of pastors and churches and ministries who insist that *their* approach, *their* teaching, *their* methods are superior to the rest.

False teachers tend to separate themselves from the rest of the group. They do it by saying, "We're the only ones that are right; everyone else is wrong." But when you examine their teaching, you see that *they* are the ones who left the beaten path; they are the ones who have deserted what Christians have believed and taught for centuries. And still many people follow them. In the book of Acts it says about Athens...

"All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." (Acts 16:21)

That's the way many Christians are today. They've become tired of historic Christian doctrine; they want to be entertained with something new. They don't want to hear about the work of prayer, Bible study, witnessing, being a servant, being faithful, or being obedient -- they want to hear something they've never heard before that makes them feel good about themselves. That's why off-the-wall preachers find it so easy to build a following. And that's why they are so likely to stray from straight way of the gospel truth.

When it comes to the subject of false teachers, Peter was pretty plain about it:

(v. 1) "...there *will* be false teachers among you." (italics added)

² Douglas Moo

It's just a fact of the spiritual life. Jesus taught the parable of the weeds, saying this about false teachers:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner's servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’ ‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ ‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’” (Matthew 13:24-30, niv)

The point is, Jesus will take care of the false teachers.

But even though we don't need to focus our ministry opposing these people, we *do* need to be aware of their existence. You simply cannot trust every person who talks or tweets or posts in the name of religion. You have to learn to practice discernment. You have to know what to look for.

Next week we'll look more specifically at this chapter because we need to be able to keep ourselves from being misled by false teaching. For today, please take this with you: false teachers exist, and their heresies are destructive. You may not be able to silence them, but you *can* protect yourself from their teaching, and you *can* focus on doing what God has called *you* to do: loving and serving Jesus by loving and serving others.