

“There Will Be False Teachers Among You”

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on 2 Peter

Texts: 2 Peter 2:1-10; Genesis 6:9-20

It is not a question of *if*, but a matter of when. False teachers and false prophets have come, they will come, and they will continually seek to introduce destructive heresies until the Lord returns. In his 2nd Epistle—which is Peter’s “testament,” i.e., his final words to the churches—Peter warns the churches of his day that false teachers and false prophets were already working their way into the churches and wreaking havoc. Peter tells us that these false teachers will speak false words and utter false prophecies. They blaspheme God and they seek to secretly introduce destructive heresies. They wilfully seek to exploit the people of God—looking for any struggling saint weak in faith, or for those who have even the slightest bit of apathy regarding the truth or Christian doctrine. Their doctrinal errors provide justification for indulging the lusts of the flesh, instead of manifesting those Christian virtues which Peter has described in verses 5-7 of the first chapter of this letter. As Peter has told us in verse 19 of chapter one, we have the prophetic word (the Scriptures) which is more sure than any human opinion and which is the light shining in the dark, and the standard by which we discern truth from error.

As we continue our series on 2 Peter, we come to Peter’s dire warning (in this chapter and in the next) about false prophets and false teachers who will arise, infiltrate the churches, and seek to lead the people of God astray. There is a very good reason why believers need to be concerned with how they live, and why they should live their lives in eager anticipation of Jesus’ return—so as to contrast themselves with those who have been deceived. The false teachers and false prophets described by Peter were undermining the very foundation of the Christian life—that God has saved us from the wrath to come, and then called us to reflect his glory through our conduct. Even as they encourage professing Christians to live no differently than the pagans around us, the false teachers are denying one of the fundamental doctrines of Christian theology; the bodily return of Jesus Christ at the end of the age, to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new.

If it is true, as the false teachers claim, that Jesus is not going to return a second time, then there is no basis for Christian ethics, nor is there any foundation for the Christian life. Not only is Christian preaching false when we proclaim that Christ will come again, but if Christ does not come again then there is no final judgment, no resurrection from the dead, no new heaven and earth, no eternal Sabbath rest for the people of God, and no heavenly inheritance. The proper motivation for the Christian life, which is that we live our lives in gratitude in light of these things, completely vanishes. If Christ is not returning, then critics of Christianity, like Nietzsche, are right—all we can do is live our lives *carpe diem* and “seize the day.” The past is irrelevant, the future remains to be written, there are no absolute standards of right and wrong, so all we have are the realities we face and the choices we must make in the present. And if Jesus is not coming back, and there is no judgment, then why not do as we please, indulge the lusts of the flesh, and seek to do what is right in our own eyes? If no one is watching, why worry about anything other than our momentary needs and pleasures?

But as Peter has told us in verse 16 of the previous chapter of this epistle, “*we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.*” Peter was present throughout much of the messianic ministry of Jesus. Since Peter saw and heard Jesus in person, Peter (and the other apostles) do not need to invent myths or

fables as do the false teachers and prophets. Since Peter was an eyewitness to the majesty of Jesus, the Apostle speaks the truth, while all the false teachers can utter are clever myths which they have devised to suit their own sinful ends. As Peter reminds his readers, he was with Jesus up on the Mount of Transfiguration. “*For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,’ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.*” Peter was with Jesus. He saw our Lord’s glory. He heard the Father’s voice.

This is why the Apostle affirms with great boldness, “*And we [i.e., God’s people] have the prophetic word more fully confirmed.*” The prophetic word is a reference to the Old Testament (and likely to the soon to be written New Testament), as confirmed by those things accomplished by Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, as well as through the glory he revealed to Peter, James, and John, while with them up on the Mount of Transfiguration. Having seen but a glimpse of Jesus’ eternal glory, Peter knows with the certainty of a faith grounded in first-hand experience, that Jesus will return a second time, when the Lord’s glory is revealed not just to three hand-picked disciples, but universally, to the whole earth.

Because of the authority of the prophetic word (Scripture), Peter reminds those receiving this short epistle, “*you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation.*” Scripture (i.e., the prophetic word) does not originate in the human will, for as Peter makes plain, “*no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*” True prophecy comes from God, and is given through the work of the Holy Spirit. True prophecy, therefore, stands above all human opinion, and it is Scripture which judges all our thinking about God, as well as the way in which we live our lives. To depart from the certainty of the prophetic word, and to instead speak false words about God, or to utter false prophecies to his people is, as Peter will tell us throughout chapter two, a serious offence against God, and is certain to bring down God’s wrath.

In verse 1, of chapter 2, Peter addresses the specifics of the crisis facing the churches to whom this epistle is being sent. The Apostle warns his readers/hearers, “*but false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.*” If Christians should heed the teaching of the prophetic word made more certain (Scripture), then Christians should likewise be very leery of those who seek to introduce destructive heresies (false words and prophecies).

In the preceding verses, Peter has already claimed authority for apostolic teaching (vv. 16-18), as well as for the Old Testament (vv. 19-21). Peter now singles out two groups who do not have such authority and whose teaching and prophecies are to be rejected. These are the false prophets (2:1a) and false teachers (2:1b-3).¹ There is significant Old Testament background to be considered here, since false prophets have plagued God’s people throughout the course of redemptive history. In Deuteronomy 13:1-5, YHWH warns the people of Israel,

“*If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that*

¹ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, on 2:1

prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

A similar warning is found in Deuteronomy 18:15–22, where Moses tells the people of Israel in verses 15 and 18, “*the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen . . . I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him,*” before going on to warn the people in verses 20-22, “*but the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.*” Such a prophet is only giving his sinful opinion. God will deal with him.

Since true prophecy has its origin in the will of God, and the final prophet is Jesus, through whom true prophecy is given by the Holy Spirit, true prophecy (the events foretold in Scripture) will come to pass, and the word spoken by the prophets will lead God’s people to trust, love, and serve him, because that word is “truth.” False prophets utter prophecies which do not come to pass and/or they lead God’s people away from him, to other “gods” and reveal doctrines contrary to those things already revealed in the prophetic word. True prophecy is grounded in God’s word. False prophecy and false words arise in the minds of sinful men and women.

Furthermore, in Matthew 24:11, while Jesus was speaking to his disciples during the Olivet Discourse about the signs of the end which will precede the Lord’s return, Jesus warned the disciples, “*many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.*”² In verse 24, Jesus reiterates the warning and adds, “*false christians and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.*” Peter was present when this warning was given, as was John, who in his own first epistle (1 John 4:1), warns the churches “*beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*”

Peter has heard reports of false teaching—knowing that Jesus had predicted this would come to pass soon after his ascension into heaven a mere thirty years earlier, the Apostle now warns the churches in his “testament.” False prophets and false teachers will arise, preaching false words and uttering false prophecies! With such an accurate prophetic prediction by Jesus, which is confirmed by the Apostles Peter and John, Christians have no excuse to taken in by those false teachers and prophets seeking to gain followers by exploiting weak-willed and weak-minded Christians. It is the responsibility of pastors and elders to be on the look out for such people and drive them away from the flock! Again, it is not a question of if, but a matter of when!

In addition to warning Christians that these false teachers and false prophets will inevitably come, Peter

² Moo, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:1.

says that in their teaching they “*even deny the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.*” False teachers will undermine the gospel, because they will exploit the death of Jesus when it suits their own ends and purposes. Furthermore, this clause has taken on significant importance in our day, since it is one of those passages most often used as a proof-text by those who deny the Reformed doctrine of “limited atonement” or better, “particular redemption.” Peter seems to be saying that there are people for whom Christ died, “*the Master bought them,*” yet who nevertheless bring upon themselves eternal destruction³—eternal destruction being an ironic reference to the fact that their false teaching has been destructive to others (who have been taken in by them and willing to follow), yet God’s final eschatological judgment will come swiftly and fiercely upon those who led others astray.⁴

How do we resolve the problem raised by this text, which on its face seems to say that Jesus died for people he does not save, and therefore appears highly problematic for those of us who hold to particular redemption-i.e., that Jesus dies for the elect only? The context points to the fact that false teachers do not openly walk into the church, declaring; “Hi, I am a false teacher, and I am here to deceive you.” Instead, the false prophets and teachers *secretly* introduce destructive heresies. The means by which they will gain an audience for their false words and false prophecies is by masquerading as genuine believers. These teachers may even be self-deceived, and often mistakenly think that they are true believers who are called to set everyone else straight. In order for their deception to work (Peter is clear that their *modus operandi* is through the means of deception), they profess that Jesus is their Lord—the sovereign Master (*despotēs*) who bought them (*agorazō*)—as though they truly believed the doctrine taught by Jesus and the apostles in the prophetic word made certain. Their conduct, however, will eventually demonstrate that they are not Christ’s, they do not trust in Jesus as revealed in the Scriptures, which means that Jesus did not redeem them (and hence did not die for them).⁵

To secretly introduce their heresies, false teachers and false prophets profess to be believers in Jesus. But they are not. At first, they say all the right things, “Jesus died for sinners.” Yet, as they attract followers and resist correction by the prophetic word made sure (Scripture), it eventually becomes clear that they have never truly trusted in Jesus, and never will. The more they teach and prophesy, the sooner it becomes clear that their words are false, and their prophecies are nothing but dreams they have made up. They are wolves in sheep’s clothes, and are enemies of Jesus. They are not among those who follow their shepherd’s voice as he speaks to his people in and through his prophetic word made sure.

What makes the false teachers and prophets such a threat to the churches is that they will be able to attract large numbers of followers. In verse 2, Peter warns, “*and many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.*” Their lies and false prophecies will not fall upon deaf ears. Many professing Christians will follow them. They reason why Christians follow these false teachers is that false teachers are able to appeal to people’s “sensuality,” (*aselgeia*). The false teachers and prophets will tell us that traditional Jewish and Christian sexuality is too limiting, too restrictive, too tied to the past. Since Christians believe that sexual relations are to be confined to marriage, Christians believe that fornication (sex before marriage), adultery (sex outside of marriage) and homosexuality (a same sex partner) are sinful acts. But the false teachers will be able to explain to the satisfaction of those

0. Moo, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:1.

⁴ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, on 2:1

⁵ See the helpful discussion in, Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:1.

preoccupied with sensuality that the biblical view is wrong. What can it hurt, if you really love your partner? Why be so Victorian, or Puritanical? Since God gave you these powerful urges and attractions, why would he then turn around and deny them to you? Then as now, if you can give people a reason (actually an excuse) to reject Christian sexual ethics and then provide them with a justification to indulge the flesh, people will follow in great numbers.

But these men are not just libertines who think everyone should enjoy the same pleasures they do. Rather, Peter identifies their motives as far more sinister. These people teach such things not because they want people to be free from religious oppression, but because they seek to exploit the people of God for their own personal pleasure. In verse 3, Peter puts it this way. “*And in their greed they will exploit you with false words.*” They will tell you anything you want to hear, so they can gain from you whatever they want—money, sex, acclaim, another notch on their belts. They will spew whatever false words are necessary to satisfy their greed. These false teachers and prophets are not people who are sincere but misguided, these people are motivated by greed.⁶ They will take your wallet, your wife, deceive your children, divide your family, destroy your reputation, and even take your soul, and they will never think twice, or feel even the slightest tinge of conscience about doing so.

Although these liars and frauds can attract followers in great numbers and with seeming ease and without immediate judgment from God, Peter reminds Christians of the ultimate fate of all false teachers and false prophets. At the end of verse 3, he writes, “*their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*” God sees them and knows what they are plotting, even if Christians do not notice or do anything about them. God will judge them accordingly, and in the right manner and time, even if it looks as though they are getting away with their deception.

In verses 4-8, Peter reminds the people of God that redemptive history is replete with examples of God’s judgment coming upon such people. Peter makes five allusions to events in the Old Testament in which God brings judgment upon the wicked, yet through which God preserves his people. The logic of Peter’s argument is as follows.

If God judged the angels (v. 4) and if he judged the flood generation (v. 5), while at the same time sparing Noah (v. 5), and if he judged Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 6), while at the same time preserving Lot (vv. 7–8) then it follows that the Lord will preserve the godly in the midst of their trials (drawing this conclusion from the examples of Noah and Lot) and it also follows that the Lord will punish the ungodly on the day of judgment (drawing this conclusion from the three examples of the angels, the flood, and Sodom and Gomorrah).⁷

We read in verse 4, “*for if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment,*” as Peter alludes to Genesis 6:1-6. The common Jewish view of Peter’s day was that the sin which brought about condemnation was that of fallen angels engaging in sexual relations with women—a view which may be common in Peter’s day, but which misses the point in Genesis 6 that the demonic element is not that angels actually procreated with humans, but that the “sons of God” (the *Nephilim*) were led by fallen angels to revolt

⁶ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:2.

⁷ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1048-49.

against the natural order of things (i.e., to violate God's commands and biblical sexual ethics).⁸ For this despicable act, these angels were cast into hell, and are now awaiting final judgment.

Next, Peter reminds his readers of the story of Noah (from Genesis 6-9, part of which we read as our Old Testament lesson). “[YHWH] did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly.” By the time of Noah, God's covenant people were perilously close to extinction.⁹ The people of God were down to eight in number, but even as God brought judgment on the world through the flood, it was through that same flood that God saved his people and preserved the elect covenant line. Noah is described as a herald of righteousness, who, while building the ark, no doubt, proclaimed to his contemporaries that God's wrath was coming upon the world, and that the time had come to repent.¹⁰

Peter's next example is that of Lot and the account of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah from Genesis 19. In verses 6-8, we read, that “*by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes [God] condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard).*” If Sodom and Gomorrah are remembered for anything, it is for the rampant sexual immorality which characterized those cities—just as the case with the false prophets and false preachers, about whom Peter is warning the churches. Lot's conscience was tormented by being in the midst of these cities, witnessing the ungodly things which went on. God rescued Lot—not only from the inhabitants of Sodom, but also from his wrath which laid waste to both cities. Here then, are several well-known examples that the Lord can bring judgment upon the wicked, while using that same manner of judgment as the means to save his people.

Having launched in verse 4 into a catalogue of well-known accounts from the Old Testament which should serve remind us that God can both deal with false teachers and prophets, and at the same time deliver his people from the wrath which he pours out upon those who speak false words and utter false prophecies (v. 8), finally in verse 9, Peter reaches his conclusion. “*The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.*” If redemptive history teaches us anything, it is that God saves (delivers) his people from the hands of those who seek them harm, even while he brings judgment upon the unrepentant.

Peter appeals to significant events in redemptive history to make this point, and Paul does the same. But Paul grounds the believer's confidence in the knowledge of the Lord's second coming. In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Paul writes, that God's people are “*to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*” Elsewhere, Paul reminds Timothy (2 Timothy 4:18) that “*the Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.*” False teachers will assault the church and deceive many, but God can and will preserve his people, even as he brings judgment upon the those who seek to deceive and then exploit the people of God, “*especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.*”

⁸ M. G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue (proper info needed), 116.

⁹ M. G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue (proper info needed), 129.

¹⁰ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:5.

In the first half of verse 10, Peter tips us off as to how to tell whether or not one of these false teachers or prophets are among us. Peter says that they *indulge in the lust of defiling passion*, and they *despise authority* (literally “lordship”). Their false words and false prophecies are specifically aimed to exploit others, along the lines of the fallen angels and the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Peter’s reference is clearly to sexual sin and a defiant rejection of biblical sexual ethics.¹¹ This is not so much a reference to Christians who carelessly fall into sexual sin, as it is a serious warning to be on the lookout for those whom Peter regards as secretly entering the church, seeking to exploit others.

But in order to exploit those whom they deceive and desire, false prophets and teachers must reject proper authority—i.e., the authority of Jesus (the master whom they profess, but whom they actually reject) who has revealed his will in Scripture, and declared that such lusts are sinful, and are to be confessed as sin, restrained, and not openly indulged. But then, this is the kind of authority false teachers and prophets deny. They will find a whole host of reasons why we should indulge our flesh for their benefit, even as they reject the master, whom they claim “bought them.”

Yes, there will be false teachers among us, seeking to exploit us for their personal pleasure. But all they have are myths, fables, false words and false prophecies, which appeals to human sensuality. We have the prophetic word made sure, a word which contains the authoritative word of Jesus Christ—the very thing false teachers and prophets reject, because in that word we find the gospel, the declaration that Jesus has died for our sins, and by rising again from the dead, has forever broken sin’s power over us. Jesus died to set us free. The false prophets seek to enslave us again to our passions. Amen.

¹¹ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, on 2:10