

“It Would Have Been Better”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on 2 Peter

Texts: 2 Peter 2:10b-22; Numbers 22:21-31

In the first three verses of chapter two of his Second Epistle, Peter warns the churches that false teachers will arise throughout the course of the age and disrupt the church. They will do so until Jesus comes back a second time—which is, ironically, a doctrine which the false teachers mentioned by Peter denied. According to Peter’s warning, false teachers and false prophets will arise within the churches and secretly introduce destructive heresies, utter false prophecies, and speak blasphemies against God. Peter warns us that their motives are sinister—because of their greed, false teachers and prophets seek to exploit the people of God. The Apostle tells us that these false teachers and prophets are like the angels who rebelled against God in the days before the great flood. They are like those evil men who mocked Noah as he built the ark. They are like the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah—men who lived to gratify the lusts of the flesh. Such false teachers and prophets will say and do anything to exploit the people of God. But their ultimate destruction is as sure as is the prophetic word (Scripture) given by God.

In the last half of the second chapter of 2 Peter 2, Peter describes these individuals in the harshest of terms. The reason why Peter can speak so harshly when referring to them is the damage these people do is not slight. They disrupt the peace of the churches. They despise Christ’s authority and his word. They place their own made-up prophecies above the authority of Scripture. They seduce others so as to steal their chastity, their money, and their reputations. The methods and attitudes of these false teachers and prophets are so callous and deceitful that Peter can say of them that it have been better for them to have never known the way of the truth, then to turn their backs upon Jesus (the master, who they claim “bought” them), while seeking to abuse and exploit Christ’s sheep. Peter minces no words when describing these people, their shameful ways, and their inevitable destruction.

As we return to our series on 2 Peter we move into what may be one of the most difficult sections in the New Testament upon which to preach because the language is so harsh, and because this section may give us the impression that we, in turn, can use this same language of others. The application is not that it is OK to call others “blots” and “blemishes” or “irrational beasts.” Rather, this is something we must leave to the Apostle who is writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, yet whose righteous anger is evident in his words. In the first half of the chapter, Peter warns us of the false words and false prophecies uttered by false teachers and prophets. He has described their selfish motives—these are not people who are sincere but wrong. They are not to be trusted, nor given any benefit of doubt. In describing their conduct in such graphic terms, Peter provides us with the reason why these individuals will be judged so harshly by the master (Jesus) whose authority they truly despise, despite their claim to be followers of Jesus.

Peter says of them in verse 10b, *“bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones.”* In saying this, Peter gives theological justification for the harsh words which follow. His words clearly echo those of Jude 8-9. *“Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you.’”* Knowing his place in the order of things, even the powerful

Michael the Archangel humbly refused to offer a blasphemous judgment or mock the devil.

Yet, Peter says these false teachers and false prophets are bold (*tolmētai*) and willful (*authadeis*), the former being a play upon Jude 9, where the Lord himself spoke the bold word (*etolmēsen*) to Satan, not Michael.¹ The false teachers and prophets are small men and sinful souls who do not realize how small or sinful they truly are. Yet they pronounce bold things about angelic beings who are much more powerful than they. Many have thought that Peter's expression "glorious ones" points in direction of those angels who serve as ministering spirits in the presence of God (the "good" angels), and who, according to Jewish legends were intermediaries in the giving of the law.²

All the Greek text says is that these false teachers slander the "glories" (the object "ones" is supplied by the translators). Clearly, Peter is referring to angelic beings here, but the question is whether or not these are evil angels (demons) or good angels (the messengers of God). The context (v. 11—where the angels mentioned seem to be among the heavenly host) points in the direction that the angels alluded to here are evil angels. In verse 11, we read, "*whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord.*" The indication is that the false teachers and prophets willfully and arrogantly rebuke the fallen angels (and Satan) even though the good angels (who are far stronger and more powerful than the fallen angels) refuse to do so—instead, leaving the judgment of these fallen angels to God.³

Commentators have long wondered why it is that would Peter pit the false teachers against the "bad" (i.e., fallen) angels. To what might Peter be referring? No doubt, there were certain practices and speculative doctrines regarding angels and demons in Jewish sects of the New Testament era, which were likely picked up by some of these false teachers and prophets—this is a theme which will surface in our study of Jude. Much of this speculation arises from Deuteronomy 34 (which describes the death of Moses), as well as a book which now lost to us, the *Assumption of Moses*, but which was known to many in the early church, and which was popular among Jews. Peter is very likely alluding to Jude 9 in verse 11, but the Apostle makes no specific reference to Moses or Michael. This lends support to the view that Peter quotes loosely from Jude in this portion of his second epistle.⁴

Perhaps a contemporary illustration might help us understand the kind of thing to which Peter is referring. We have all witnessed Televangelists, Pentecostal faith-healers, and Word-Faith preachers claim to be able to spiritually bind Satan and his demons, so as to supposedly prevent them from afflicting people with sickness and disease. It is not accidental that these same teachers speak all kinds of false words about God—many times their theology is just plain heretical. Shamelessly, they utter countless false prophecies, so that when one does not come to pass, they just make another. And why is it that there always seems to be scandalous sexual peccadillos associated with them and their ministries, just as Peter mentions here. Of course, these people love to put on public spectacles in which they claim

¹ Davids, The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude, Logos, on 2:10b

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

³ Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 260-263; Moo, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:10b-11; Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:10b-11.

⁴ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1055.

(in the name of Jesus, of course) to possess the power to “bind the devil,” or “cast out demons.”

This, it seems to me, to be very much in line with Peter’s comments here. While not even Michael the Archangel rebuked the devil (even though Michael was far more powerful than Satan), these men think nothing of mocking Satan or fallen angels. They are bold and willful in doing so. But the reality is that they have no idea whatsoever of the power of those demonic forces which they claim to be able to bind. Before the eyes of the watching spirit world (of Angels and demons) these false teachers and prophets make fools of themselves whenever they make such outlandish claims and blaspheme the glories.

Peter goes on to say of them, “*but these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction.*” By thinking of themselves as possessing power over angelic beings whose power they cannot begin to understand, and of whom they have no business challenging or mocking, Peter identifies them as “irrational animals” and “creatures of instinct.” The false teachers act without reason (*alogos*), based upon some sort of primal urge. They do not behave as reasonable creatures should. They blaspheme the “glories” about which they know nothing, mocking Satan and the demonic forces which they cannot see, but which they have no business mocking.⁵

So, as we watch with a sense of sad fascination Televangelists bind the devil (as and comedians, in turn, mock the Televangelists), we can only imagine what the devil thinks of these irrational individuals as they rebuke him. Although Satan is bound in the present age (Revelation 20:1-10; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12), the false teachers don’t realize that they are pulling the tail of a mortally wounded animal, whose bite is far worse than they can ever imagine. The false teachers and prophets make grandiose claims for their spiritual power and insight, while the Apostle describes them as acting like wild animals who blaspheme beings they the really know nothing about. Although, they act like foolishly, like irrational animals, they still gain many followers and thereby pose a serious spiritual danger to the churches.

But mark Peter’s words, these men will be caught and “destroyed”—if not a reference to temporal judgment (as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira), this is a certainly reference to God’s judgment which will inevitably come upon them. Once again, Peter reminds the people of God that even though it may appear that these false teachers go unchecked as they seek to exploit others, God knows who they are, and his judgment upon them is certain. These false teachers may deny that Jesus is will return again, but when Jesus comes a second time, the same false teachers who don’t think it will happen, will face the full fury of God’s wrath. The irony here is palpable. Peter says of them in the first part of verse 13, they go about “*suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing.*” They will get what they deserve.

Their conduct is reprehensible because “*they count it pleasure to revel in the daytime.*” As people driven by sensual urges (v. 2) who seek to indulge the lusts of the flesh, primarily through exploiting others, these false teachers have a completely warped sense of right and wrong. Whereas those who seek to indulge the flesh, usually do so at night, these people are so bold, arrogant, and irrational, that they engage in their pursuit of pleasure in broad daylight, instead of under the cover of darkness. This implies that have no sense of shame because their consciences are seared. In Romans 13:12–13, Paul speaks of such conduct in a similar way. “*The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.*” As one

⁵ Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 263.

writer puts it, these false teachers and prophets “were so consumed by and fascinated with evil that they could not even wait until dark, the time when evil is typically practiced.”⁶ Acting upon animal instincts, they are completely unashamed of their conduct.

In verse 13, Peter describes them as “*blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you.*” Peter’s words closely parallel those of Jude 12. “*These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted.*” As Jude describes these people “*hidden reefs*” which tear up ships which sail over them, Peter describes them as “*blots and blemishes*”—people whose very presence stains and defiles the church. Jude’s reference is to those who participate in the Lord’s Supper (the love feast) all the while they are scheming to exploit someone else. Peter too speaks of these people as defiling the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is not defiled by the presence of repentant sinners—this is the very place repentant sinners belong. Rather, these men use the Lord’s Supper as a cover—appearing as genuine believers, even while they plot and scheme against others with whom they together partake of Christ’s body and blood.

We know this from Peter’s description of them in verse 14. “*They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!*” The people to whom Peter is referring are not new Christians who do not know any better. Neither is he referring to people who are genuinely struggling with sin (even sexual sins). Peter is speaking of people whose sexual appetites dominate them to the point that they are actively looking for those of whom they might take advantage so as to satisfy their own lusts. These people look for those whose faith is weak (or who have similar passions and lusts of the flesh) and they actively target them for conquest. Camouflaging themselves as teachers and prophets, these men will use their apparent high spiritual standing as but a means of impressing others, but with the goal of exploiting them. These men look for those who are “unsteady” because their hearts are trained in greed. In other words, this is habitual behavior—not a one time thing. Again, Peter reminds his readers of the grim truth that these men are under God’s curse—the same kind of curse Paul places upon those who deny the gospel by adding things (such as circumcision) to the finished work of Christ.

These men have completely lost their way. In fact, says Peter in verses 15-17, “*forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.*” Turning to an interesting Old Testament example to make his point (the story of Balaam in Numbers 22-24), Peter says these men have followed the way of Balaam, and have gotten themselves lost because they have been following their own greed. The story of Balaam is important in Jewish thought because it is cited a number of times in the Old Testament (i.e. Num. 31:8, 16; Deut. 23:4-5; Josh. 19:32, 24:9-10; Neh. 13:2; Mic. 6:5), as a fitting illustration of what happens to those who wander away from the truth because of their greed. Peter appeals to this well-known account (at least in Jewish circles) as a prime example of what greed can do.

As our Old Testament lesson, we read that portion of the story of Balaam mentioned by Peter in which Balaam’s life was saved by a talking donkey. In the context of Peter’s larger point (that the false teachers are acting like irrational beasts), Balaam who acts in an irrational manner, is rebuked by an irrational

⁶ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:14

animal (a donkey).⁷ Peter's point is much the same as Paul's warning to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:3-10, where Paul warns in verse 5, of those who imagine "*that godliness is a means of gain.*" In verse 10 of that passage, Paul warns, "*for the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.*" Those who make the same error Balaam did, and who behave as irrational beasts, deserve the same kind of rebuke Balaam received from a talking donkey.

Echoing the words of Jude 12-13, 16, in verse 17 of his own epistle Peter writes of these false teachers, "*these are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.*" Jude calls these men clouds without rain, while Peter calls them springs without water. Jude says they are blown along by the wind, while Peter says they are mists driven by a storm. The image is one of great promise, but the reality is that they "got nothin." They are all hat, and no cattle, to use a quaint Texan phrase. The allusion to water is probably taken from Proverbs 13:14, "*the teaching of the wise is a fountain of life, that one may turn away from the snares of death.*" For these men, the fountain has dried up. Ironically, the storm produced by their actions, will end-up being the vehicle of their own destruction, and eventually consume them.

In verse 18, Peter goes on to remind us of their true intentions, "*for, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error.*" All the while they are blaspheming the "glories" and demonstrating their false spiritual insights and imagined powers over the devil and his minions, they are nothing but folly. Everyone sees it, except for those who are taken in by them. In this case, Peter makes it perfectly clear that these men will indeed attempt to seduce those new to the faith, or those struggling with sins of the flesh—*those who are barely escaping from those who live in error.* Their mode of operation is clear in the Greek text. They make loud boasts (a participial clause) in order to entice others to join them in their sin.⁸ Based upon Peter's comments about the nature of their doctrinal error in the next chapter—the denial of the Lord's return—these false teachers were very likely approaching those they intend to seduce using the argument that there was no final judgment, so there was no reason to restrain (or not indulge) the passions of the flesh.⁹ These false teachers are Neitzchians before Nietzsche. If there is no judgment, then its "eat, drink, and be merry" for tomorrow we die.

Their motives are despicable. We learn in verse 19 that "*they promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.*" These men are not champions of freedom and personal liberty seeking to overturn the narrow-minded religion of Jews and Christians, so that humanity might be free. That would be a noble thing to do, *if* the underlying assumptions were true. But these men do not care a whit about the freedom of those whom they exploit. They make all kinds of promises, in order to get whatever they want from those whom they have seduced. These men are users, thinking themselves to be free to indulge themselves however they wish. But they will quickly deny that same freedom to those they seek to exploit.

Despite their apparent "freedom" to act as they please—grounded in their heretical notion that the Lord is

⁷ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 1056.

⁸ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:17

⁹ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, Logos on 2:17

not going to return again—the reality is that these men are slaves to their own passions. Those who follow them, likewise become slaves again to the same passions demonstrated by the false teachers. Or even worse, perhaps, their victims become consumed by the guilt of the various sins these men have led them into committing, in violation of their own consciences. The false teachers promise freedom to indulge yourself as you see fit. They make this behavior seem, at first, like it is no big deal. But the price paid by those who follow them is to be enslaved all over again to that very same guilt for which Christ died to set his people free. False teachers and false prophets leave their victims guilt-ridden and ashamed.

As Peter puts it in verse 20, *“for if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.”* Peter’s words are almost a verbatim statement of the condition of these who are delivered from demon possession, only to be possessed again. In Matthew 12:45, Jesus says of a demon which has been cast out, *“then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation.”* It is truly a miserable condition to have once known the forgiveness of sin, only to find oneself enslaved to it all over again. This is what the false teachers do to those deceived by them. Their victim is an emotional and spiritual wreck. But the false teacher—feeling no shame or remorse—begins the hunt for their next victim.

These men will not escape unscathed, however. Peter tells us that these are people with whom you would not want to trade places. The Apostle writes in verse 21, that *“it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.”* This is because God will judge them severely and harshly. The standard applied to them will be the law of God (i.e., the holy commandment, the law taken as a whole), something these men once claimed to embrace (the way of righteousness—i.e., a life lived in conformity to God’s revealed will from a sense of gratitude), but which they have now rejected. It would have been better if these men had never become Christians (or better “appeared” to become Christians) only then to deny the master (Jesus) who these men once claimed had purchased their freedom for them in his sufferings upon the cross. No doubt, they will be judged more harshly because they now openly deny by their conduct, the very thing they once professed to believe.

Once again, Peter looks to the Old Testament to describe their conduct, quoting from, Proverbs 26:11. In verse 22, Peter refers to the two animals which the Jews considered unclean, but with which Gentiles had no trouble domesticating, pigs and dogs. Peter declares, *“What the true proverb says has happened to them: ‘The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.’”* The reason why Jews thought so poorly of pigs and dogs is because of animal behavior like that which Peter describes, which is why both animals were considered ceremonially unclean.

In the case of the false teachers, they once professed the way of righteousness, but have now returned to doing the very same things they once themselves condemned. Their conduct renders them unclean (that is, guilty before God) and their very presence in the churches renders all those who tolerate their behavior unclean as well. False teachers and false prophets will eventually reveal themselves by returning to conduct completely inconsistent with their earlier professions of faith. They will not manifest the virtues Peter described in the first chapter. Instead, their conduct will be characterized by the pursuit of sensuality and by the human wreckage they leave behind. They are not hard to spot. They speak false words about God. They utter false prophecies which they make up. They despise the authority of Scripture and do what is right in their own eyes. And they are driven by their sensuality.

Their conduct, sadly, brings shame to cause of Jesus Christ and to his people. In the next chapter, Peter tells us, scoffers will come because of the abuses of the false teachers and prophets. Of course, scoffers will come, because scoffers always follow in the parade after the false prophets and teachers, leaving the church to sweep up after both.

These men will come. They will claim that Jesus is their master, and then even celebrate the Supper with us. But when they reveal themselves to us, Christ's church must refute their errors from the prophetic word made sure (the Scriptures), and expose their motives—greed and lust. We must realize that these people are users who will leave their victims in shame and doubt and simply go about their way.

Peter reminds us, and warns them, that *it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.*” In knowing the way of truth—that Jesus died for our sins, was raised for our justification, and then led us in the way of righteousness—we must live every day in the blessed hope that Jesus will return again, to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. But then, this is the very thing these men deny.