

3. Everything we need to avoid false teaching

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now let's have a moment of prayer before we look together at 2 Peter 2.

God our Father, your word speaks to us with many accents in many different ways. The passage we have read is a disturbing one, a compelling one, one which indeed does penetrate right into our hearts and right into our minds.

Father, we ask that we will be faithful to this passage, not attempting to evade its message and avoiding, as we've just sung, the tempting choice of doubting or delay.

So open your word to us and open our hearts to that word. In Jesus' name. Amen. So this is our third study in 2 Peter.

The general heading of this series is Everything We Need Until the Lord Returns. And this evening our subject is Everything We Need to Avoid False Teaching.

[1 : 15] And we have this blistering chapter to consider. A long, sour tirade. A digression only of interest to those who are concerned with ancient history.

These were some of the comments I found in the commentators this week as I wrestled with this passage. And it is understandable how many people are frightened off by this.

And this of course illustrates one of the great advantages of continuous expository preaching. If you simply gathered about like a butterfly from text to text, it's unlikely you would land on a text like this. Or if you did, you would probably fly away quickly to something you found more congenial. This kind of passage probably arouses two different types of reaction. There are some people, it has to be admitted, who love a fight.

Who are just too fond of polemics. And they probably warm to this chapter. Not so much because of what it says, but because it will give them an opportunity to evacuate their own prejudices.

[2 : 28] That's one thing that must be avoided when we're dealing with a chapter like this. On the other hand, there are those who are so timid that they feel they can never say anything negative at all.

That they must always be positive. And such a person is not likely to be attracted to a chapter like this. Remember this as we begin. The Lord Jesus Christ said to us, the marks of the true pastor, says this in John 10, are twofold.

One, that he feeds the sheep. He feeds and cares for the sheep. But the hired hand will do that as well, if it pays good enough.

But what the other mark of the true pastor is that he fights the wolf. And that the hired hand will never do. Peter, the true pastor, as he feeds the sheep, recognizes also the necessity of fighting the wolf.

After all, if we don't fight the wolf, there will be no sheep to feed. So obviously the two things are absolutely necessary. And the link with chapter 1 is very striking. It's no digression at all.

[3 : 36] After all, in chapter 1, he's told us we have everything we need for life and godliness. That's the first 11 verses. And then last week, we looked at the last part of the chapter, which says we have everything we need in the word of God.

But, he says, as he turns from defense to attack, as he turns from feeding, if you like, to looking after the flock, he says there are false prophets and there will be false teachers.

And chapter 2, verse 3, they will exploit you with false words. Now the apostles are described as those, chapter 1, verse 16, who did not follow cleverly devised myths.

And by contrast, here are those who will deceive you with false words. Now the chapter is hard-hitting. The language is colourful because Peter is in deadly earnest about false teaching.

And we really have to ask ourselves, if we find this chapter unpalatable, we've got to ask ourselves a simple question. Do we care as much as the apostles did, as much as the prophets did, about

false teaching?

[4 : 49] Now there's a great concern today about the food we eat and what it does for our bodies. And that's absolutely right and proper. But, do we show similar concern for the food for our souls, for spiritual food?

Now one of the reasons, of course, why we don't is that if we eat unhealthily, that will very often show, very quickly, in all kinds of ways. But false teaching is less obvious.

It takes time. A church does not go from being gospel church one week to being virtually apostate the next. An individual doesn't wake up one day walking with God and then go to bed the next morning, wake up denying everything.

It takes time. One of the great evangelical leaders in the 1970s was Francis Schaeffer. Some of you may have read some of his books, like *The Church at the End of the 20th Century*.

And Francis Schaeffer always asked the question, when he heard about certain teaching, what will this teaching do to our grandchildren? Because it may not be obvious in this generation, what will it do to our grandchildren?

[5 : 58] In other words, the kind of teaching that's being given in churches today is the kind of teaching that will shape, for good or ill, the small children in our congregation.

That's how important it is. So Peter here is giving us an anatomy of false teaching. Many of the commentators spend a great deal of time trying to work out who exactly these false teachers were. We're not going to do that this evening because we are never going to meet a Nicolaitan or a Valentinian or other such groups who are prominent in the first century. What we are going to meet are their 21st century equivalents.

So I want to ask three questions. First of all, why is false teaching dangerous? That's verses 1 to 3.

That's the first question. Second question is, what does false teaching look like?

How do we recognize it? That's verses 4 to 16. And finally, thirdly, what are the results? What happens as a result of false teaching?

[7 : 06] That's verses 17 to 22. Now, when people have gatherings to discuss what needs to be done about the church, very often, as all kinds of things suggest, which have to do with structure, which have to do with plans, and which have to do with programs.

But very seldom are people really concerned about the kind of teaching that God's people are being given. See, false teaching isn't just a minor matter, which the church would be better without, but on the whole doesn't matter too much.

Notice what Peter describes it as. Verse 1. Destructive heresies. Now, let's linger on this just for a moment. Peter is not saying that gospel ministers will agree on absolutely every detail.

after all, in our gospel ministry here and elsewhere, we work with people who have different ideas, for example, on church government, different ideas on baptism, and that sort of thing.

But these are all godly people who are trying to live by the scriptures, teach them, build up God's people by them. What Peter is talking about here, and it's made clear in the next phrase, even denying the master who bought them, is that this is striking at the very heart of the gospel.

[8 : 33] This is going to the very essence of what the gospel is about. So why is false teaching so dangerous? It's dangerous because it is totally destructive.

It destroys the church. It doesn't matter how wealthy a church is, how fashionable it is, how many gifted and clever people it may have in it, how many things it may do, how busy it is.

If it has false teaching, that church will disappear. And you can see this all around us in the demise of churches which once preached the biblical gospel but no longer do.

You see, false teaching is dangerous, first of all, because it's persistent. There have always been false teachers. There were false prophets. Right away back in Deuteronomy 18, Moses warns of false prophets who speak presumptuously, when the Lord has not spoken by them.

And I think it's Deuteronomy that gives us a clue to what Peter is meaning, denying the master who bought them. Now some people get into a tingle about this and say, does that mean that these false teachers were saved and lost again?

[9 : 45] Now the scripture makes it very clear that that is impossible. You cannot be saved and lost again. People who are genuinely converted, people who are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world cannot be lost.

That's not what Peter is thinking about here. Peter is talking here, I think, rather, he's echoing Deuteronomy 32, verse 6. Is he not your father who bought you?

And he's warning the people not to fall into the danger that the generation who perished in the wilderness did. In other words, what he's talking about here is total unbelief in the Lord himself. The generation who perished in the desert ultimately said God wasn't what he said he was. He's not helping us in the present. He won't bring us to the promised land. And actually, Egypt wasn't all that bad after all.

And the apostles are terrified this will happen to the Christian church that they'll go back. And you see, if he didn't do what the gospel says he did, if he doesn't do now what the gospel says he does, and above all, if there's going to be no power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, then they are denying the very heart of the gospel.

[11 : 04] It's not a difference of opinion about baptism. By the way, I'm not saying that things like baptism and church order don't matter at all. There are occasions where we might wish to make a stand on these issues.

What I'm saying is that here we are talking about heresies which deny that God is who he says he is, deny that Jesus is the everlasting word, the Father's only Son who will come again in power and great glory to judge the living and the dead.

That's what it means to deny the Master who bought them. But the other danger is that it's very plausible. Verse 2, many will follow them and in their greed they will exploit you with false words. They sound plausible. Because this message makes no demands. The one thing a false teacher or a false prophet will never say to people is that they need to change.

Their ministry will be simply one of affirming people where they are, making them feel good about themselves. Now, ultimately, the true gospel will do that and much more because in the true gospel is offered not a kind of pseudo realizing our potential but a true realizing of it as we become like Christ, as God makes us what he created us to be.

[12 : 26] And, thirdly, it's dangerous because it encourages sensual behavior. Verse 2, and many will follow sensuality. You see how all this fits together.

if there is no judgment, if there is no, if there is no day on which we have to give an account of ourselves to God, then, of course, the way we live doesn't matter.

Of course, what we believe doesn't matter all that much. And the gospel is simply reduced to a kind of, it's simply reduced to a kind of counseling activity where you make people feel good.

You can have non-directive counseling where you make people feel good. That's what Peter is warning against. He is warning against destructive heresies. That's the first thing, then.

There's, of course, an awful lot more in these verses, but the chapter is long, and I want us to try and get the flow of the thought. But secondly, what does false teaching look like? Verses 4 to 16.

[13 : 29] Now, one thing that Peter is emphasizing here, and he's going to emphasize this again in chapter 3, is we know that judgment will happen in the future because it's already happened in the past.

But if God did not spare the angels when they sinned but cast them into hell, if he did not spare the ancient world, he did not spare Sodom and Gomorrah. And these verses here, as all the commentators notice, are very close to some verses in Jude.

And there's a great deal of discussion about who borrowed from whom. Now, this isn't something we want to go into this evening, but if you read Jude later and compare it with this, you'll find that Jude has certain material, particularly about Enoch and about the devil disputing with Michael over the body of Moses, which is particularly suited to a Jewish audience, whereas Peter, writing largely to Gentiles, omits some of that.

So, what I'm really saying is that chances are that it is Peter who's drawing from Jude here and adapting material. In any case, it's the word of God, the word of God coming through both of them. So, what does false teaching look like? First of all, it is devilish in origin. Now, that seems to me to be the point of verses 4 to 10, which talks, first of all, about the fall of Satan and his angels.

[14 : 59] God did not spare the angels when they sinned. We learn from passages like Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28 that Satan was not always Satan.

He was created as an archangel of light, the guardian of the throne of God, but not content with that, wanted to be God himself. And of course, when he came to the Garden of Eden to tempt humanity, he wants to drag them down in that as well.

So, before there is a human fall, there is this fall of angels who become demons. And then there is this passage about the ancient world preserving Noah, a herald of righteousness.

Firing to these chapters in Genesis, which Willie took us through some months ago, and about the demonizing of the human race that took place then. The curious passage, is the sons of God marrying the daughters of men.

And these sons of God almost certainly are people who are basically taken over by demonic powers, the warlords, the tyrants, and so on. People like Nimrod mentioned in these early chapters. [16:12] And so, the origin of false teaching is actually in Genesis 3. Did God really say?

That's the word of the false teacher. Did God really say? Who was the first false teacher? And who is still the arch false teacher? Surely Satan himself.

And you get an awful lot of this. Some weeks ago, a leading churchman preaching a sermon to a group of other leading clerics said, if we take the phrase Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father but by him, then the natural interpretation of these words is what it says, that Jesus is the only way to God.

They went on to say, but you might progressively interpret it in different ways. You might want to say, oh, this shows that salvation is by faith and by grace. Now, that's astonishing.

That's not an obvious and a natural interpretation. that is basically taking the text and simply saying it got it wrong, that Jesus is not the only way to God.

[17:28] And that's really at the heart of so much false teaching nowadays, that Jesus is our way to God. Jesus may be the way to God for me, may not be the way for you, may not be the way for other cultures and other religions.

And you can hear once again the voice of the serpent. did God really say? So, false teaching is devilish in origin. Now, don't misunderstand that.

That doesn't mean that false teachers are nasty and horrible people. It would be very easy if that were the case. It would be very easy if false teachers came in wearing a badge saying, I am a wolf, and smelled of the pit itself.

They're not. Many of them are charming people. Many of them are the kind of people who are fun to be with and interesting to listen to. But, they have been duped by the arch-false teacher himself.

And, therefore, their teaching is unwholesome, their teaching is destructive, their teaching destroys rather than builds up.

[18:35] That's the first thing. It's devilish in origin. Did God really say? But, secondly, this is the paradox. False teachers disdain the supernatural world.

This is the devil's masterstroke. He manipulates these false teachers to say what he wants them to say, and yet they deny his existence.

I think that's what these verses 10 and following, bold and willfully do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones, and so on. And you get more about this in Jude, where even the archangel Michael did not bring, as Jude says, a railing accusation against Satan.

And this has been so much part of false teaching in the last 200 years, a denial of the supernatural world.

Now, we know from the letter of James that the demons believe and tremble. The theology of hell is totally orthodox. But these men do not believe and they do not tremble.

[19:39] they want to make the message palatable, as they imagine, in the contemporary mind, but all that happens is that the churches are empty, that people no longer believe anything.

So it's devilish in origin, this day in the supernatural world, and thirdly, they live self-indulgently. Verse 12, these are like irrational animals. NIV says, brute beasts, and once again an Old Testament illustration.

Verse 14, forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor. Now, you can read the story of Balaam in the book of Numbers, and how he took money to entice the Israelites into idolatry and adultery, and was rebuked by the voice of the donkey.

Now, the point surely about the donkey is that God's word has power whatever instrument it uses. And I think that's important to remember, for particularly those of us who preach and teach, and we get rather conceited, that God can use anything.

God uses a donkey, a dumb donkey, to rebuke the prophet. Now, Peter's language is colourful, is it not? Blots and blemishes reveling in their deceptions.

[21:03] Verse 13, they have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin, they entice unsteady souls, they have hearts trained in greed. It never begins that way. Two hundred years ago, a lot of good

and decent men teaching in the theology faculties, felt they could hold on to the gospel, but deny a great deal of the, what they called traditional and outdated views.

Now, they did personally retain a belief in the gospel, but as the generations have passed, that is no longer the case. It's no accident at all that those who are loudest in their advocacy of gay rights and so on are also those who deny the resurrection, the virgin birth, and the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because you cannot pick and choose with the gospel. The gospel is a seamless robe. If you begin to pull away threads, the whole garment unravels.

Early in the 20th century, a German theologian called Bultmann wanted to demythologize the gospel, remove all the supernatural bits about heaven and hell, virgin births, resurrections, angels and demons, and then it would be palatable to modern people.

What was Bultmann left with paradoxically? He tries to demythologize. He's left with a myth. The myth of the pale Galilean. Jesus, a nice, friendly little man, went around preaching universal brotherhood and the universal fatherhood of God.

[22 : 38] And it's astonishing why anyone ever bothered to crucify someone like that. So you see what's happening here is that false teaching may begin quite harmlessly.

It begins with trying to accommodate the eternal gospel to the prejudices of the age. That's one of things so often people are called prophetic preachers.

And what that means is not that they're preaching the biblical gospel but that they are preaching the fashionable prejudices of the time and colouring them with religious language.

It's not easy to speak like this. Far easier, as they say, simply to be positive. But then you see, if you only ever make positive statements, no one's ever going to disagree.

We all believe in motherhood and apple pie. No one's going to disagree with that. Only when you begin to say, what do you mean then by this? What does it mean that Jesus rose from the dead?

We went to Durham a good number of years ago.

[23 : 39] The notorious bishop of Durham at that time, David Jenkins, basically. So of course I believe in the resurrection. The resurrection means that the resurrection faith rose in the did God really say.

It disdains the supernatural world. We've come of age. We don't believe in any of this kind of nonsense any longer. It leads to self-indulgent lives and it robs the gospel of all its assurance.

There is no assurance left. There is no gospel. We don't have a gospel to proclaim. We've only some insights we can share. And finally, what are the results of false teaching?

The final verses 17 to 22. What happens when the ministry of the church is dominated by false teaching? Well, first of all, it leads to barrenness.

Verse 17, these are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. The gospel is living water. The gospel is the bread of life.

[25 : 11] The gospel satisfies. The gospel gives life. This teaching gives nothing. It mists its myths and it does not satisfy.

I've never heard of anyone who was converted to Christ by such a gospel. Because if all the gospel is doing is putting a religious flavor on what people are already doing, why bother?

Why go to all the trouble? It's only the radical biblical life-changing gospel that brings people to faith. Secondly, it leads to slavery.

Verse 18, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves. Slavery to whims, slavery to evil desires, slavery to public opinion.

Now, one thing I must make clear here. Peter and Judah's well are not talking about immature people who are deceived. They are talking about false teachers.

[26 : 21] And one of the reasons why good teaching is so important is to protect the young and the gullible who will be so easily taken in by this. He's not talking about mistakes.

He's not talking about stumbling. He's talking about deliberate disobedience and defiance. false teachers. I once was at a meeting where John Stott was speaking to a group of ministers and someone said to him, Dr. Stott, what's the difference between a wolf and an awkward sheep?

A question that many people would like to know the answer to. And Stott replied, the main difference is that in scripture, the wolf is someone who is particularly associated with false teaching.

In other words, not the dupe of the false teacher, the false teachers themselves. That's why Jude says in his letter, of some make a difference, having compassion.

The young and the gullible who are deceived, we must have compassion, understanding, listen to their questions, engage with their questions, and don't slap them down. But for the false teachers, for the wolf, we must not give an inch to the wolf, because the wolf comes only, as Jesus says, to steal and to kill and to destroy.

[27 : 41] And the end result is disgusting, is it not? Verse 22, the dog returns to its own vomit. Well, that's picking up verse 12, isn't it?

The irrational animals, the brute beasts. Now, the first phrase, the dog returns to its own vomit, is quoted from Proverbs 26, about the fool, who returns to his folly.

And remember, in Proverbs, the fool is not the unintelligent person, the fool may be highly intelligent, and often is. People like Richard Dawkins and so on, the fool are people who leave out God, who disdain God, and who despise him.

And the other is a common proverb of the time. You see, false teaching is easy to glamorize. It's usually heralded as a new and interesting insight.

Peter is saying, if we deny the Lord who bought us, if our teaching is continually full of phrases like, did God really say, then we're going to end up like this, disgusting, despised, and despicable.

[28 : 51] It has to be said the results of false teaching are all around us. You see, false teaching in universities and colleges leads not necessarily to destructive heresies in the pulpit.

As I look around at Scotland, one of the things that strikes me is that there's probably not an awful lot of heretical teaching. But the trouble is that the pulpits are so often full of men who have nothing to say at all, who have imbibed this teaching, who have abandoned the biblical gospel and gone to cunning, cleverly devised myths, and therefore have nothing to say at all.

One of the tragedies of this is, there are many people in our churches, particularly older people, genuinely converted, genuinely good and decent people, but who have never been taught the scriptures.

Because they've never been taught the scriptures, they're not growing. I know, you can say we've all a personal responsibility, that is true. But if the teachers in the congregation are not teaching, if they're not expounded in the word of God, if, as Milton says, the hungry sheep look up and are not fed, how can we expect them to feed themselves?

After all, one of the blessings of good expository preaching is it makes people hungry and anxious to do the same thing themselves. And one of the disastrous consequences of no teaching and barren teaching is just that it leaves people with nothing to hold on to, nothing to live by.

[30 : 27] So, see, for all of us this is important. I want to say this as I finish. This is not addressed to the leaders of the congregation primarily.

John, in his second letter where he attacks false teaching, addresses it particularly to leaders, but here it's addressed to the whole congregation. Please don't imagine that theology is something for people who study theology.

well, there's an awful lot of dull, boring, heavy, tedious, academic theology. We don't want that. But the point is this, if we don't have good theology, we won't have no theology, we'll have bad theology.

If we don't think godly thoughts, we won't have no thoughts, we'll think lustful and destructive thoughts. If we don't engage with scripture and feed our hearts and minds and build ourselves upon that, then we will do what the prodigal son did and feed on husks and end up completely barren.

We need to pray and pray very seriously that good and godly teaching will come to predominate in our churches.

[31 : 42] And as Luke says in the letter to the Acts, Jerusalem was filled with the apostles' teaching.

Let's pray that Glasgow will be filled with the godly teaching which is able to build up and give an inheritance among those who are sent to fight. Let's pray.

God our Father, these are sobering words, perhaps words we would rather not hear. And yet we know that when we come across a part in your word that we're not instantly attracted to, that is perhaps the part that you most want us to listen to and to give heed to.

So Father, please strengthen and build up the good teaching in this city and indeed in this country and throughout the world and raise up many, many more more to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ.

We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Our closing hymn is number 531, Lord of the Church.

[33 : 07] We pray for our renewing Christ over all, our undivided aim. Number 531. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.

[36 : 13] Thank you.

Thank you.