



ALLURING DECEPTIONS

Pastor Al Detter II Peter 2:10-22 English Standard Version
5:30, 9:30 & 11:00am Grace Church Feb. 23-24, 2008

One of the big news items this week was the recall of 143 million pounds of tainted beef. Part of the story involved the presence of the beef in our area. Tainted food is seen as a threat and the USDA regulates violations pretty tightly. And I think we're all grateful for that.

But what about tainted doctrine? Who regulates that? How is it spotted? How dangerous is it to spiritual health? And who does the recall?

We're in a 6-part series on the book of II Peter. These are Peter's last words to the church. In the book he deals with some vital issues that confront the church. The 1st issue was about 7 qualities we must add to our faith if we're to become mature and reflect the divine nature of God. That was the 1st half of chapter 1.

The 2nd issue is found in the 2nd half of chapter 1. How did the Scriptures originate? Peter says very clearly that the Scriptures came directly from God as the Holy Spirit guided godly authors. Then Peter applied his teaching this way—the world in which we live has been darkened by sin. This Word from God is our only light to guide us on the right path.

Last weekend, we came to the 3rd issue—false teachers in the church and tainted doctrine. Of all the issues Peter deals with in his little book, it's to this issue he gives the most attention—36% of the book. He's flagging this issue as very important. Besides, Peter is very mindful of the words his resurrected Lord spoke 3 times to him after the resurrection, "Tend My sheep". Peter was not about to leave the flock of God unprotected from wolves.

We looked at verses 1-10 last time. There Peter gave us insight into the characteristics of false teachers in his day, their coming judgment, and that God knows how to rescue the godly from false teachers and sinful temptations. You might be thinking, "Okay, let's move on to the next issue." But Peter says, "Not so fast. I'm not done with what I have to say."

Did you ever feel so strongly about a very important and controversial issue that you unloaded your thoughts on a spouse or close friend? That's kind of what Peter does here. You sense his intensity as he rambles through his thoughts without a whole lot of structure. But this seems to be the point Peter drives home in verses 10-22—tainted teaching is the product of tainted character. There's something wrong in the heart of the false teacher who fabricates teaching to support the error of his ways.

So today, we're going to look at the tainted character that produces tainted teaching. I've organized Peter's words around 4 major character flaws that become evident in false teachers gone mad (cf. II Pet. 2:16).

Character Flaw #1—Unaccountable (II Pet. 2:10-12).

False teachers have no respect for authority. They're autonomous and answer to no one. Verse 10 says that they even "despise authority". While that could mean that they look down and scorn heavenly authorities or the authority of Christ, I'm certain that it means false teachers resent the authority of church leadership. When church leaders call false teachers into accountability, these teachers treat them with lack of respect and lack of submission. They're not going to be happy about being called into question.

So Peter says that false teachers are bold and willful. They use the muscles of superior knowledge and ridicule to persist in their delusion. And Peter tells us just how far their rebel spirit will go. Look at verse 10. They “blaspheme (blasphemountes) the glorious ones (doxas).” False teachers somehow move beyond the realm of despising earthly authority to reviling spirit beings.

The word translated “glorious ones (cf. Jude 8)” in my text is variously interpreted. Some appeal to Jude 8-9 as a parallel passage and say that Satan and fallen angels are in view here. I disagree. I can’t conceive of Peter using a word meaning “splendor” and “majestic” in this way.

Peter is talking about glorious angelic beings. My guess is that the false teachers were teaching that angelic beings were inferior to them and not really a realm to be reckoned with. But Peter teaches that angels, who are mightier than false teachers, don’t use their power to revile each other before the Lord. They know just how accountable they are before God. False teachers don’t.

False teachers believe they’re beholden to no one and that they have special knowledge about spiritual truth that no one else has. But see what Peter says in verse 12—like irrational animals, they lash out at authority about things of which they are ignorant.

It looks very much like false teachers are in control, that even God’s hands are tied. But just as wild animals are hunted and destroyed, says Peter in verse 12, their destruction is coming. The harm they’ve caused others will eventually destroy them.

Hear me, our preachers and teachers need to be accountable in this church—to God, to the Scriptures, to the Elders, and to the church. To the extent that we resist accountability, to that extent must we be censured.

Character Flaw #2—Predatory (II Pet. 2:13-16).

This flaw is so prevalent in Peter’s teaching here. False teachers don’t just teach error, they’re after some-thing from those who follow them. Peter identifies 2 areas of high interest for false teachers who’ve lost their moorings:

1. Sexual gratification (vss. 14, 18). These false teachers hang out at church. Verse 13 is talking about the love feasts the early church used to have—fellowship meals followed by communion. Without shame, false teachers would show up and get drunk along with some other members of the church (cf. I Cor. 11:17-22; Jude 12). How the leaders back then permitted this, I don’t know. But the false teachers come among them with an agenda.

Verse 14 says that they were looking at the women with lustful thoughts. With their eyes, they undressed every woman that appealed to them. They were incapable of looking purely at a woman. Peter says their appetite for sexual sin never rested (NEB). In verse 18, Peter talks about their fixation on sexual passions.

Look who the target is. Verse 14, unsteady (asteriktoi—easy to sway) believers. New Christians who have not yet been grounded in their faith (Col. 2:7). Christians who don’t know truth from error yet. In verse 18, Peter makes the point that these are new Christians who are trying to come out of their former sensual lifestyle (aselgeiais—sexual excesses) from the unbelievers around them. These new Christians were still very weak sexually and could more easily slip back into sexual sin.

False teachers know who they’re looking for. New Christians are in their crosshairs. The text says in verse 14 that these are the kinds of people false teachers “entice”. “Entice (deleazo)” is a fishing word that Peter knew well. It means “to catch with bait, to hook, to seduce”. These predators prey on the young and the weak. But false teachers also have another interest.

2. Money (vss. 14-16). In verse 14, Peter says that they've trained their hearts in greed. The word for trained is the Greek word from which we get our word "gymnasium (gegumnasmenen)". They've 'worked out' in the gymnasium of finessing their ability to fleece money from people. Verse 15 says that they've forsaken the right way—the way of truth—for the "way of Balaam". The way of Balaam is ministering in the name of God for personal gain.

Balaam is an interesting character in Numbers 22-24 in the Old Testament. Balaam, a prophet in Israel, was hired by a pagan king (Balak) to curse Israel. Balaam resisted for awhile, but we learn in the New Testament that Balaam finally succumbed. He loved financial gain even though he knew he was doing wrong. (Balaam not only capitulated on the cursing, he urged the Moabites to trick Israelite men into illicit sexual relationships with Moabite women introducing more immorality into Israel {Num. 25:1-5; 31:16; Rev. 2:14}).

Verse 16 says that a talking donkey rebuked and restrained the prophet's madness (paraphronian—to be apart or away from right thinking). How do you like that? A donkey had to do what no other human leader would do. Now I know this sounds kind of unusual—a talking donkey. But I believe this actually happened. We're not told to take this in any other way in the Bible.

I have a friend by the name of Ralph. He's on staff at Miracle Mountain Ranch. He had a parrot by the name of Paco. You all know where I'm headed with this. That parrot could nearly carry on a conversation. He said, "Hello!, What?, I want a cracker, and Shut up" for starters. He called out the names of those he knew well and even imitated their tone of voice so that if someone said their name sternly, so would he.

He could sing opera and cat call. He imitated people's prayers. And he would warn strangers by saying, "Paco bites!" My secretary, Kathy, used to have a bird that whistled, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame". If birds can talk and if rocks can cry out the praises of Jesus Christ, then I have no problem believing that God can use a donkey to rebuke a prophet.

We've seen all kinds of greed in the ministry by high pro-file leaders in our lifetime. They've honed their skills to get the money off the unsuspecting while they live like royalty.

You see, false teachers prey on their followers. They abuse their leadership privileges. And many lives have been ruined over the corridors of time.

Character Flaw #3—Libertarianism (II Peter 2:17-19).

Verse 17 says that the people thought they were get-ting life-giving water from the false teachers. But Peter says that all they were getting was dry springs and mists driven by stormy winds. There's no spiritual water in bad teaching.

The false teachers in Peter's day were advocating a form of unbiblical freedom—that believers could participate in all kinds of sinful excesses. They were teaching liberty, alright, but not the kind of liberty Paul was teaching the people. Theirs was a freedom to turn from the holy commandments of God under a false grace. It was a freedom to indulge the appetites of their passions.

But Peter shows us the twist. That kind of freedom is act-ually bondage. In verse 19, Peter says that false teachers were not free at all; they were slaves to their evil passions.

Did you know that there's no person who's truly free—not then, not now? We're either a slave of Christ or a slave of the appetites of the flesh. We're made to serve some-thing. When we serve Christ, that's true freedom.

Peter states a powerful proverb in verse 19, "Whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved". We might think doing anything we want as much as we like is freedom. The truth is—when it takes over, even though we might say we can stop at any time, we've become a slave to an addiction. We're in bondage. People all over the world who think they're free to choose excesses of any kind are actually slaves of sin. Christ came to break the power of that kind of captivity (Rom. 6). But what a façade of freedom libertarianism presents!

Paul hits the target in Romans 6 when he addresses the abundant grace of God that breaks the power of sin in the believer. He says, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Can we use the freedom of grace to indulge in behaviors that defy godly conduct? Paul says, "Absolutely not!" The freedom that grace brings is not intended to provide a cover for willful and continuing sin. Christians who indulge in anything other than in adding godly qualities to their faith are actually in bondage to an addiction. Addictions are not freedom; they're a pathway to a train wreck.

Character Flaw #4—Unregenerate (II Pet. 2:20-22).

By all appearances, false teachers seem to be Christians, to have had a conversion experience. In fact, they think they're Christians and that they have some kind of superior spiritual knowledge. It's from that spiritual misconception that they operate and gain a following.

But Peter is very clear. False teachers who have a track record of abusing power and people don't belong to Christ. They have no part in the future kingdom of God. Numerous times in chapter 2 (vvs. 1, 3, 10, 12, 14, 17, 20), Peter comes back to the judgment that awaits false teachers on judgment day. Verse 14 says that they're accursed.

But I want to focus on the last 3 verses of chapter 2. In verse 20, Peter says that if false teachers earlier on had escaped the defilements of the world and had come to a knowledge of Jesus Christ, that condition is no longer true of them. They may appear religious, but they don't share in the salvation provided by Christ. In fact, Peter says that they're worse off than before they came to know Christ (cf. Mt. 12:45; Lk. 11:26; Heb. 6:4-8). Peter says in verse 21 that it would have been better for them to have never known the way of righteousness than to have known it and turn away from the holy commandment.

Why are they worse off? Because it's very unlikely that they'll see the error of their way and repent. When they came to Christ originally, they recognized their need for conversion. Now they think that they're uniquely converted above everyone else—which is absolutely erroneous.

Peter then cites a hopeless proverb in verse 22—the dog returns to its vomit and the pig, after a bath, to its mire. False teachers return to their original condition. They cloak themselves with a form of Christianity but they're woefully lost. They're unregenerate and unless Peter told us their actual condition, we'd never know it because they're so good at "Christian-speak".

There's a theological problem that might be obvious to some of you. Does this mean that these false teachers were once saved and have lost their salvation? There are at least 2 viewpoints on this. They were never saved and after a profession of faith, eventually showed their true unregenerate state. Or they were once truly saved and fell from saving grace because of their sin. I'm not going to solve that problem today.

But I am going to address the outcome. Peter says without doubt that false teachers like the ones he describes are lost. They're reprobate. They're unregenerate. We need to take his word for it.

The takeaway for us is that when false teachers exhibit the kinds of qualities that Peter reveals in chapter 2, they're not authentic Christians. They're Christian in name only headed for certain judgment like the fallen angels, the ancient world of the flood, and Sodom and Gomorrah earlier in the chapter.

Conclusion

Well, that's the revelation on false teachers that Peter brings to us. As I close our teaching on false teachers, I want to make 3 vitally important statements:

1. Don't dismiss the teaching on false teachers as irrelevant. Admittedly, the teaching in II Peter 2 is about false teachers gone wild. You might be thinking, "I've never seen that kind of stuff around Erie." Most of the time, you won't see things get this bad. Praise God for that.

But—don't think the issue of false teachers is irrelevant to you or to our church. False teachers are a constant threat to our spiritual wellbeing and even more so as we approach the last days. We can't let down our guard. False teachers who don't manifest the full flower of their character flaws are still dangerous. They creep in very unsuspecting and leave damage in their wake.

Paul tells us that false teachers at this more imperceptible level teach different doctrines, not agreeing with the sound words of Jesus Christ. They devote themselves to myths and genealogies which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God. They teach doctrines which don't promote godliness. And they have an unhealthy craving for controversy and quarrels about words which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, and constant friction among people (I Tim. 1:3-4; 6:3-5). That kind of stuff is around more than we think.

2. Be careful of witch hunts. There are many interpretations of Scripture and theological systems in the church of Christ over which there are disagreements. Those areas within orthodoxy have basically been identified for centuries. Differing interpretations like that among Christians does not a false teacher make. So when we disagree about things like ordination of women, capital punishment, predestination vs. freewill, eternal security vs. loss of salvation, and the like, false teaching and character flaws have nothing to do with it.

What's more, ours is not to judge the spiritual destination of anyone who claims to be a Christian, false teacher or not. God knows the heart and God knows who will be judged. We need to stay out of that arena.

Yet most certainly, if teachers teach things that are blatantly opposed to the clear and historic teaching embodied in the New Testament, church leaders need to confront that and people in the church need to get as far away from that as possible.

3. Be sure you're being rooted and built up in Christ and grounded in the faith (Col. 2:7). Young Christians are especially vulnerable to false teachers. We need to know the teachings of the Bible because the more we know the Bible, the more we come to know Christ. And the more we come to know Christ, the more we're transformed into His likeness. Any teaching that doesn't have as its outcome, godliness, is misfiring badly. Right teaching energized by the Holy Spirit produces right living. And it protects us from the ravages of false teachers.

So—would you pay attention to learning the Bible for yourself? Would you pay attention to the teaching of the Word of God from this platform and in small groups and in Sunday School. Will you be like the Berean believers who didn't swallow what the teachers said but checked it against God's Word for themselves? For Paul said to Timothy words that apply to us as well—if we pay attention to the teachings of the Scriptures and become absorbed in them, we'll not only grow to spiritual maturity, we'll insure our salvation as well (I Pet. 2:1-3; I Tim. 4:11-16). That's a luxury false teachers don't have!