FALSE PROPHETS AND TEACHERS: HOW TO RECOGNIZE THEM

2 Peter 2 and Jude

We’re going to be discussing a very serious topic this morning. In fact, it may be the most important issue that our churches face today. It’s the subject of false prophets and false teachers. They’ve infiltrated the church (in the broad sense – the body of Christ, across denominational lines). I can tell you right now that we are not going to get finished with Chapter 2. But that’s OK. We will pick it up where we leave off next week.

I want to begin our discussion by reading to you what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11 as he warns the Corinthian church: “What I am doing I will continue to do [teaching truth], in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we [the Apostles] do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.” That is in a nutshell the message of 2 Peter Chapter 2. False teachers disguise themselves as true believers in Christ, but in reality, they are not. They’re pretenders. They’re deceivers. And they are dangerous. We need to be able to recognize them and deal with them.

For the purposes of our discussion we will not differentiate between false prophets and false teachers – the terms are interchangeable. Both false prophets and false teachers teach untruth whether it is from a pulpit in a church setting, from a classroom or from a television or radio studio. What Peter has to say applies to both.

READ 2 Peter 2:1

Jude says that these same people have “crept in unnoticed.” Jude also says that they “deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” False prophets and false teachers are not new. They’ve been around for a while. When Peter says they “arose among the people” he’s referring to O.T. Israel, God’s chosen people. God addressed the issue of false prophets in Israel back in Deut 13. God said if a false prophet arises among you, take him out and kill him. “You shall not listen to the words of that prophet…that prophet…shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God…So you shall purge the evil from your midst.” God takes the issue of false prophets very seriously. One O.T. example of a false prophet (there are many) is found in Jeremiah 28. The false prophet was a man named Hananiah. He prophesied what the people of Judah wanted to hear – Judah will have victory over Babylon and all the vessels of the temple that they took away will be returned. Jeremiah, the true prophet of God, said, “No, Babylon will prevail and Judah will be under its yoke.” Of course history proved Jeremiah to be right and Hananiah to be dead wrong (literally, he was because God killed him).

There were false prophets in Jesus’ day as well. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing (wool – the normal garment of an O.T. prophet) but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” In other words, they’re not what they appear to be. Jesus goes on. He says, “You will recognize them by their fruits.” False prophets reveal their true colors by their attitudes and actions. Peter will go into detail about that here in Chapter 2. Jesus then offered this terrifying warning to us: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day [the great white throne judgment] many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” (Matt 7:21-23)

False prophets and false teachers look like we do, they talk like we do, they do religious things and many have big followings, but they do not truly belong to Jesus. So how do we recognize them? Well the first thing that Peter mentions (v 1) is their “destructive heresies” (note: now you know why Peter spent so much time in Ch 1 talking about knowing the truth). There are many heresies Peter could have identified (denying the deity of Christ, the virgin birth, the resurrection, the second coming, etc.), but the big one he points out is “denying the Master who bought them…” Who’s that? It’s Jesus! 1 Peter 1 says that we were “ransomed…with the precious blood of Christ.” Peter is saying that false teachers deny the sovereign lordship of Jesus Christ. They name Him with their lips, they even call themselves Christians, but their lives give them away. They refuse the lordship of Jesus and live for themselves, for their own pleasure and for their own gain. When Jude says that they “pervert the grace of our God into sensuality…” he’s basically saying that they live their lives with the attitude that “I’m saved, I have experienced God’s grace and forgiveness and now I am free to do whatever I want.” In their mind they have license to sin, sensuality. Big warning here: a person who lives like that probably isn’t really a believer. If Jesus really was their Lord, they would have a desire to please Him. But their lives give them away! God’s not fooled. Peter mentions their destruction – he will do this frequently in Ch 2.

READ 2 Peter 2:2-3

This is just Peter’s introduction to false teachers. He will go into more detail later. V 2 “Many will follow their sensuality…” Jesus taught extensively about this in Matt 24. He said, “And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold…” (Matt 24:11) Later He warns that “false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matt 24:24).

V 2 Peter says “because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.” We’ve seen this in our day. TV preachers and their scandals, countless pastors having affairs – it’s an embarrassment to Christians and it hurts the cause of Christ. Their sinful actions undermine the truth of the gospel message that they were supposed to be preaching. Their ministries never recover and their credibility as preachers of the gospel is ruined. Their actions have turned a lot of people against Christianity. Many people reject Christ because of the ungodly behavior they see. [note: destructiveness of what they do in effect dooms many people to hell who otherwise might have been saved]

So we see their destructive heresies in v 1, their sensuality in v 2. In v 3 Peter mentions another trait of false teachers – greed. Peter says that they “exploit you with false words.” I don’t think I need to elaborate on this too much. We see this played out with so many of the TV preachers today. We know what motivates them! And it isn’t the spreading of the gospel and drawing people to Christ. It’s all about drawing people to them and to their ministry. They’re driven by a love of money and fame.

Jesus said to His followers: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matt 5:16). Anything we do that is good for the kingdom of heaven should give glory to God and point people to our wonderful Savior. We’re merely God’s instruments. Paul tells believers to “walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.” (1 Thess 2:12)

V 3 says that their condemnation (their sentence) is “from long ago.” It was set by God long ago and it has not been reduced or weakened by time. God hated false prophets in the O.T. He hated false prophets in Jesus’ day. He hated false prophets in Peter’s day and he hates false prophets today. Their judgment will be swift and sure. One commentary I read said “God’s justice does not sleep and it is never late.”

READ 2 Peter 2:4 (Jude says the same thing)

God judged even the angels who rebelled against Him.

READ 2 Peter 2:5-6

God judged the world in Noah’s day bringing “a flood upon the world of the ungodly.” He judged the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah turning them to ashes, wiping them out completely. Jude adds that God will “execute judgment on all…” He will “convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness…”

READ 2 Peter 2:7-10a

God will punish the ungodly but Peter says that He will also rescue the godly. He is a God of judgment, but He is also a just God, a righteous God, a gracious God. He will forgive those who repent and follow Him. He’s not asking us to live perfect lives – just look at Lot and so many other examples in the Bible – but as Peter said in Chapter 1 we believers in Jesus Christ are to “make every effort” to live a life of moral excellence, self-control, godliness and love. Hey, nowhere are we taught that following Christ is going to be an easy road!

READ 2 Peter 2:10b

The “glorious ones” (“angelic majesties” in the NASB) refers to fallen angels, demons. These false teachers boldly and presumptuously mock and ridicule these created beings that are higher (in the created order) and much stronger than they are. How arrogant and dangerous that is. They underestimate the power of Satan. Look at the next verses…

READ 2 Peter 2:11

Not even the holy angels do that. God and the heavenly angels take Satan and the demonic realm seriously and they need to be taken seriously by us as well. Jude adds that not even the archangel Michael would pronounce judgment against Satan but instead he simply told the devil, “the Lord rebuke you.”

READ 2 Peter 2:12-13a

Basically Peter says that the false teachers don’t even know what they are doing. He likens them to animals who don’t think rationally and they don’t reason. They just operate on their built-in instincts. These false teachers are “blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant” (which he just talked about). That last phrase in v 12 literally in the Greek says, “in their destroying, they will be destroyed.” Peter is speaking here of the destruction they cause by their heresies. And for that God will punish them severely.

READ 2 Peter 2:13b

Sinners typically practice their sins at night, but Peter says that false teachers “revel in the daytime.” They spread their heresies, practice their sensuality and exhibit their greed in broad daylight. They cause a blemish on the fellowship of believers in the church – “they revel in their deceptions while they feast with you.” They do all this while having fellowship with believers. John instructs believers in 2 John: “If anyone comes to you and does not teach [the truth from God’s word], do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting.” John says, “They are not from God, they are wicked, they are deceivers and the antichrist.” This is something we need to take seriously. As Christians, we must stand for the truth of God without compromise. We must not tolerate false teachers. We cannot allow them to “blemish” that which God considers to be good and holy.

READ 2 Peter 2:14

This verse touches on the personal lives of false teachers. Not only are they adulterous and have an insatiable appetite for sin, driven by their lusts, out of control morally, but they get others to behave like they do. Peter says they “entice unsteady souls,” they prey on the weak, those who are young in the faith, maybe even those who are unbelievers. They entice people who are emotionally vulnerable. “Entice” means “to bait with a hook.” False teachers target those who are filled with guilt, sin, fear, and anxiety. They have no desire to help them. They’re driven by greed. Peter says they are accursed. Jude says “woe to them!” This is a pronouncement of severe judgment. To illustrate this further Peter uses the example of Balaam from the O.T. as a prototype of what these false teachers are…

READ 2 Peter 2:15-16

Remember the story of Balaam from the O.T.? His story is told in Numbers 22-24. The king of Moab, Balak, fears his enemy Israel. He knows that he cannot defeat them. So Balak approaches Balaam, a prophet of God, to pronounce a curse on Israel. He offers Balaam great wealth if he will do this for him. At first Balaam resists the king’s offer but it becomes evident that Balaam is interested in the king’s offer. God tells Balaam to have nothing to do with the Moabites and not to curse Israel. But Balaam insists on going to meet with the king and his delegation. So off he heads on his donkey. On the way to the meeting an angel of the Lord with sword drawn blocks the pathway. The donkey sees the angel and veers off the roadway to avoid him. Balaam doesn’t see the angel and in his anger he strikes the donkey. The donkey talks back questioning Balaam as to why he had hit her. Finally Balaam sees the angel and the angel tells Balaam to go meet with the king but only to speak the words that God puts in his mouth. Three times Balaam speaks and three times he pronounces words of blessing on Israel. The king of Moab is angry with Balaam. The fourth time Balaam speaks it is words of curse against the enemies of Israel including Moab. But Balaam is motivated by his greed. The gold and the silver are too enticing. He reasons that if he can’t curse Israel, he will devise a different strategy – Numbers 25, he suggests to the king of Moab that they seduce the Israelite army with Midianite women. The Israelites will then be led into idolatry and God will curse them for their sin. The strategy works and 24,000 Israelites are struck down by God. Just like Balaam the false teachers of Peter’s day are not motivated to speak God’s message. Like Balaam they are motivated by greed, by personal gain. Numbers 31 tells the end of the story. God has Balaam killed. Destruction.

READ 2 Peter 2:17

Here Peter emphasizes the emptiness of the false teacher’s words. They make a lot of promises. They offer spiritual refreshment. They promise life-saving truth. But in the end, just like underground springs that have dried up, there is no water. The morning mist that brings the hope of much needed rain to an arid region soon lifts and is blown away. Here’s the bottom line – there is no water! There is no spiritual refreshment to be found. This is the opposite of what Jesus taught in John 4 when He told the woman at the well: “The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” In John 6 Jesus said, “whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” The truth of the saving gospel of Jesus Christ is like living water. And the false teachers don’t have any to offer. They may stir one’s emotions and offer empty words promising great things, but in the end they offer nothing of substance, no life changing message at all. They bring no message from God. All they have are their own deep-sounding words that are empty and useless.

At the end of v 17 Peter offers yet another reminder of the end that awaits them, a place of “gloom and utter darkness” reserved for them (speaking of hell). Remember, these false prophets only pretend to be Christians, but they are not really saved.

READ 2 Peter 2:18-19

V 18 “They entice by sensual passions of the flesh…” They attract people, their message appeals to people. They say what the people want to hear. They offer a religion that tolerates their fleshly desires. And who is it that they are enticing? Who are the victims of these false teachers? “Those who are barely escaping from those who live in error [unsaved].” Who would these people be? Those who are weak in their faith, new believers or possibly even those who have yet to come to faith. People who are seeking some sort of spiritual comfort for their troubled lives – those racked with guilt, burdened by sin, filled with fear, consumed by anxiety. Their victims are those who are most vulnerable spiritually. Generally speaking those who are strong in their faith, people who are well grounded in the scriptures, will not be enticed, carried away by the message of false teachers.

V 19. These false teachers promise the people they preach to “freedom” from all their problems, yet Peter says that they themselves aren’t free. He calls them “slaves of corruption.” Back in 2 Peter 1:4 he says true believers have escaped the corruption in the world which is caused by sinful desire. Not so with these false teachers. They themselves are slaves to sin. They may promise freedom, but the Bible teaches that real freedom over sin can only come in Jesus Christ. And since they don’t have Christ they don’t have the power of the Holy Spirit living in them. And if they don’t have the Holy Spirit in them then how can they have victory and freedom from sin? So, Peter says, they’re “enslaved.”

READ 2 Peter 2:20

At some point in their lives these false teachers were in mainstream Christianity. They possessed “the knowledge of our Lord.” At some point their desire was to escape the pollution, the filth, and the sin of the world. At one time they were on the right track. But since then they have become entangled in the world again. They apparently were never regenerated. Their hearts were never truly changed. They may have received some knowledge and even undergone some moral reformation, but they were never truly saved. Now they have drifted off track. The last part of the verse sounds a whole lot like something Jesus taught. READ Matthew 12:43-45. So, just like the Pharisees who Jesus was addressing, they think they have knowledge, they think they are spiritual, but they don’t really know God. They don’t have any real power over sin. And so they find themselves right back where they started, and now in worse condition than before. And why is that? Because they, having heard the truth, have rejected the truth for another gospel, another message.

READ 2 Peter 2:21

“The way of righteousness” refers to the truth of Christianity. In v 2 it is called “the way of truth.” In v 15 it is called “the right way.” The “holy commandments” refers to the scriptures, God’s word. READ it again with this clarification. That is why Peter says in the previous verse that “the last state has become worse for them than the first.”

If you know the stories behind many false teachers they started out in the church, the true Bible believing mainstream Christian church. Then for whatever reason – it varies – they moved away and created their own version of the truth. Many claim to have received a new truth from God or had some kind of a vision or supernatural experience. Many refuse to preach about hell or against sin. After all, that’s not popular. It’s not what people want to hear. The bottom line is that they have moved away from the truth of God’s holy word.

Peter as a shepherd and protector of God’s people is angry. You can sense the burden he has for believers who he will soon leave behind to deal with these false teachers and the garbage they spread. You can sense divine indignation in Peter’s tone. Then he closes out the chapter with a graphic illustration of what the false teachers are really like…

READ 2 Peter 2:22

The first is from Proverbs 26:11: “Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.” The second is taken from Jesus teaching in Matthew 7:6: “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.”

Dogs and hogs… That’s what Peter thinks of false teachers. They eat their own vomit and they wallow around in the filth of the world.

With that Peter goes right into Chapter 3 and says, “I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets [as opposed to the false prophets] and the commandments of the Lord and Savior thru the apostles [God’s holy word]… because the scoffers, the false voices are coming. They are here. They are all around us. How will you recognize them? By knowing the truth found in here (the Bible). How will you deal with them? Stay away from them. Do not give them an ear. You stay grounded right here on the level ground, on the firm foundation, on the rock of Jesus Christ.