

False Teachers Described, Part 3

II Peter 2:17-22

What is a false teacher? When the Bible uses this description, it is a very strong condemnation. Just because we don't agree with someone doesn't make them a false teacher. People can come down on different places on issues within the bounds of Scripture and still be brothers and sisters in Christ. There may be times when Christians need to exhort and even rebuke one another when we go astray, like Paul had to rebuke Peter when he was giving in to some of the pressure of the Judaizers (Galatians 2:11). But Paul never accused Peter of being a false teacher. We should be very careful with how we use this term: "false teacher."

False teachers are wolves in sheep's clothing. They are in the church, but they are not of the church. They serve the lusts of their flesh, not the living God.

We have already seen this in II Peter 2, but the last few verses of this chapter clearly reveal false teachers for what they really are. This chapter ends by telling us three things about false teachers: 1) They are full of empty promises. 2) They teach a false gospel. And 3) They act according to their nature as unregenerate men. This passage was inspired and preserved by God for us to warn us about false teachers that we would recognize them and be on guard against them.

I. The Empty Promises of False Teachers (v. 17-19)

Verse 17 begins, “These are wells without water.” This is a simple illustration: You would expect to find water in a well. If you are thirsty and you see a well you have an expectation that the well can meet your need for water, but a well that has no water is unable to meet your need. In the same way, false teachers inspire false hope. They promise something they cannot give. They offer what they do not possess.

Verse 17 goes on and calls false teachers “clouds that are carried with a tempest.” This could be a description of clouds that are driven by a strong wind and blow away without giving any of the refreshing rain that they promise. Or it could be a description of clouds that at first appear to contain the blessing of rain, but then turn into a terrible storm that brings destruction.

Again, false teachers don’t deliver what they promise. They promise liberty, but they deliver bondage. They promise a blessing, but deliver a curse.

Compare false teachers with true teachers. Look back at the first verse of this chapter. This verse introduces the topic of false teachers that the rest of the chapter builds upon. It says, “There shall be false teachers among you.” The word “teachers” here is the same word that is used in I Corinthians and Ephesians to refer to Holy Spirit-gifted teachers in the church (I Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11).

Those who have the Holy Spirit gift of teaching are the opposite of false teachers. They are like wells full of water and clouds full of refreshing rain. Teachers provide instruction, direction, and comfort to the church body. Teachers are not the source of these blessings for the church. Rather, they are the conduit through which God provides these blessings for the church.

In contrast false teachers are empty wells and storm clouds. They are a source of pain and trouble for the church. Their false teaching and the effects of their false teaching is the fruit of their own wicked hearts.

Next, verse 17 says, “To whom the midst of darkness is reserved forever.” This is the seventh, and final time, we are told in this chapter about the end of false teachers. See here the fitting punishment God has prepared for false teachers. Those who spend their lives promoting darkness in this world have the “midst of darkness” reserved for them for all of eternity.

Let this be a sobering reminder to all of us: our lives in this world prepare us for the world which is to come. A wicked life prepares you for the just judgment of God. A holy life, by the grace of God, prepares you for the joys of Heaven.

J. C. Ryle wrote: “I know that people are fond of talking about death-bed evidences. They will rest on words spoken in the hours of fear, and pain, and weakness, as if they might take comfort in them about the friends they lose. But I am afraid in 99 cases out of 100 such evidences are not to be depended on. I

suspect that with rare exceptions, men die just as they have lived. The only save evidence that we are one in Christ, and Christ in us, is a holy life.”¹

Verse 18 begins with the word “for.” The apostle is going to explain what he just said. The next two verses, verses 18 and 19, explain why the apostle described false teachers as “wells without water and clouds that are carried with a tempest.”

Verse 18 tells us that false teachers “allure” those that had escaped from error. This word “allure” is the same word that is used in verse 14 where we are told that false teachers are “beguiling unstable souls.” It was a word used by fishermen or people who trapped animals and it means “to entice with a bait.” How do false teachers do this, what bait do they use to allure?

First we see that false teachers “speak great swelling words of vanity.” False teachers will use impressive language to disguise their false teaching. They will often have tremendous confidence. They may sound educated and bold and extremely competent. Matthew Henry commented, “[False teachers use] lofty expressions, which have a great sound, but little sense.” Church history tells us that some of the earliest false teachers the church had to contend with, the gnostics, would make up their own words to describe some of their false teaching. These words sounded impressive, but they had no real meaning. These false teachers

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*

would use these impressive but meaningless words to deceive people who didn't know any better.²

We must be careful that we are not deceived by “words of vanity.” This is why all Christians must be careful and diligent students of the Word of God. The world is full of people seeking to deceive. We must be careful who we listen to, and always double-check that what we hear lines up with the Word of God.

The actual bait of false teachers is the lust of the flesh. Verse 18 says, “They (false teachers) allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness.” False teachers preach indulgence. They say things like: “Do what feels right,” “God wants you to be happy,” and “You should have your best life now.”

False teachers live by the philosophy that the chief end of man is the happiness of man. Do you think your happiness can only come at the expense of holiness? So be it! The higher law of your happiness overrules whatever this old book might say. Live a little! Indulge the lusts of the flesh. And so, with the bait of wantonness, false teachers entice people with a false gospel.

Make no mistake: the lusts of the flesh are not compatible with godliness. The Bible does not say, “Be ye thankful that Christ is holy so you don't have to be.”

No. What does it say? God tells us in His word, “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (I Peter 1:16).

² Mentioned in John Calvin's commentary.

A man who has no part of holiness in this life has no part of God. Anyone who teaches they you can indulge in the lusts of the flesh because Christ was holy for you is perverting the gospel and our text identifies them as false teachers.

Who is in danger of being deceived by this bait laid out by false teachers? The end of verse 18 says, “Those that were clean escaped from them who live in error.” Some of your Bible translations may say “those who are barely escaping,” or “those who are just escaping.”

This seems to agree with verse 14 where we are told that false teachers entice “unstable souls.” New believers or immature believers are especially susceptible to the baits of false teachers. People who do not have discernment developed from a personal study of the Word of God are in danger of being duped by false teachers. People who have an outward show of Christianity, but no inner reality, are easy marks for these wolves in the church.

Once again we see that the greatest safeguard against false teachers is personal Bible study. Be a student of the Word of God. Don't try to stand in the faith of another, but dig into the Word of God. Humbly ask the Lord for wisdom and discernment. Hide the Word of God in your heart. The Word of God is the only sure guard against false teachers.

Verse 19 proves that false teachers offer empty promises. Verse 19 begins, “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption.” False teachers offer a false promise of liberty.

There is liberty, freedom, in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel sets us free from the curse of the law. The gospel sets us free from the chains of sin. The gospel sets us free from living however our lusts compel us. The gospel sets us free to serve God. True Christian liberty is freedom from sin. This is not the liberty offered by false teachers.

The liberty offered by false teachers is one that has no respect for the power of Satan as he seeks to destroy, no loathing for the works of the flesh, and no fear of God. It is a false liberty. It is not freedom **from** sin, but freedom **in** sin. Such liberty is bondage disguised. It is like gold-plated shackles.

The apostle Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, points out in this verse that false teachers do not possess the liberty they offer to others. False teachers promise you freedom, but are they free? No, they are servants of corruption. This word “servants” is *doulos*. They are slaves, slaves of of corruption. They have sold themselves into bondage to sin.

Verse 19 ends with saying, “For of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage.” Whatever overcomes you holds you in bondage. If you are overcome with sin, you are in bondage to sin. Sin is deceitful. We harbor secret sins in our hearts and we think, “I control this thing.” You don’t control your besetting sin, your besetting sin controls you. Throw off your sin and flee to the cross of Jesus Christ. It is a fearful thing to consider that if we are overcome with sin, we are in bondage to sin.

The opposite truth offers us hope and encouragement. If you are overcome by sin, you are the servant of sin. But if you are overcome by the grace of God, what are you? A servant of God. What a glorious truth. Don't live in the shackles of sin. Live as a servant of God.

A life that is overcome with sin is not the mark of a free Christian, it is the mark of someone who is in bondage to sin. False teachers say that grace has bought us license to sin; that the blood of Jesus Christ gives us liberty to be overcome with corruption. This verse simply invites us to examine the claims of false teachers.

They offer freedom, but are they free?

No. They are overcome with sin, and whatever overcomes a man brings him into bondage. False teachers are slaves to sin.

This is why verse 17 called false teachers "wells without water" and "clouds carried with a tempest." The promises of false teachers are empty promises. Under examination we see that they offer what they do not possess. Don't be deceived by those who teach that you can have freedom in Christ to sin. Christ sets us free from sin. Those who are overcome by sin are still the servants of sin. They are not the servants of Christ.

These false teachers are preaching a false gospel. In verses 20 and 21 Peter explains the false gospel of false teachers.

II. The False Gospel of False Teachers (v. 20-21)

Verse 20 begins with the words, “For if . . .” With these two little words we are invited to consider what false teachers are really saying. We have to consider the implications of this perversion of the gospel that false teachers promote. If such a thing were possible, if what false teachers claim was actually true, then consider this . . .

Look again at the first part of verse 20: “For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” What does that sound like? That sounds like the effects of the true gospel. That sounds like true liberty in Christ: freedom from sin. Escaping the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of our Savior Jesus Christ.

This is a great Bible truth: knowledge of Jesus will begin to separate you from the pollutions of this world. We don’t read the Bible one time and then enter a state of sinless perfection, but a knowledge of Jesus Christ will set you free. A true knowledge of Jesus Christ will allow you to escape from the pollutions of this world.

We will never attain perfection in this life, but consider: without Christ we are dead in sin and we do not fight against the corruption of sin, no more than a corpse can fight against decay. But in Christ, He gives us life, we are alive to holiness, sin no longer has dominion over us, and we fight against the pollutions of

this world. A human body that has life fights against decay. So we, once we are alive in Christ, fight against the decay of sin.

Now remember, Peter is illustrating the false gospel of false teachers. Peter is not saying that they have truly escaped from the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of Jesus Christ. This was their claim. False teachers claim to be Christians. They claim to have liberty, and true Christian liberty is freedom from the pollutions of this world. And so Peter says, “For if . . .” If this is true.

Verse 20 continues, “For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome.” So here we see the whole “if” statement: “If, after they have escaped, they are again entangled in the pollutions of the world.” False teachers are entangled in the pollutions of the world.

This entire chapter makes this abundantly clear. Verse 2 tells us that their ways are “pernicious,” harmful. Verse 3 tells us that they are covetous and they lie. Verse 10 tells us that they walk after the flesh, despise authority, are presumptuous, and self-willed. Verse 12 calls them natural brute beasts, ignorant, and corrupt. Verse 13 tells us that they have no shame in their sin. Verse 14 adds that they are adulterous and cursed. Verse 15 says they have “forsaken the right way.” Clearly false teachers are entangled in and overcome with the pollutions of the world.

Again, “if.” If this is true. If these false teachers at one time escaped from the pollutions of the world, but are now overcome by them again, then what? If this is true, then what?

Look at the end of verse 20, “The latter end is worse with them than the beginning.” Even if false teachers were telling the truth, it would be bad news. A gospel that does not include freedom from the power of sin is bad news. If Christ does not break the power of sin then we are not really free.

False teachers claim to be Christians, yet their lives are dominated by sin. They have some level of knowledge about Christ, but it is not a saving knowledge. They know about Christ yet go on in sin. Because of this Peter says their end is worse than their beginning.

Look at verse 21: “For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them.” First, we see in this verse that the way of Jesus Christ is the “way of righteousness.” God does not save people and leave them in their sin. God saves people and leads them in paths of righteousness. As we grow in our knowledge of Christ, we will grow in holiness. This is the on-going work of sanctification that is happening in the heart and life of every true believer.

This is the clear teaching of Scripture. I Peter 1:2a says Christians are, “Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.”

Romans 8:29a says, “For whom he (God) did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.”

Ephesians 1:4, “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.”

II Timothy 1:9 says that God has “saved us, and called us with an holy calling.”

The way of Christ is the way of righteousness.

This verse goes on to tell us that it is better to have never known about the way of righteousness, then to know it, and reject it. See here the tremendous weight of responsibility that rests upon you if you have heard the gospel. This verse is specifically talking about false teachers, but what is said here applies to everyone.

Have you heard the gospel of Jesus Christ? Have you heard that there is a God in heaven who is one day going to hold you accountable for your sin? The Bible is clear, Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

Romans 6:23 says “The wages of sin is death.” All the death, all the pain, all the suffering in this world is a result of sin, but that’s only the beginning. If you die in your sin, you will face the eternal wrath of God. The Bible calls this the “second death.”

Revelation 21:8 says, “But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.” There is only one escape from this second death: you must turn in faith to Jesus Christ. Again, Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Flee from the wrath to come. Flee to the cross of Jesus Christ. Turn from your sin which brings upon you the wrath of God. Turn to Jesus, the only Savior, the only who has the power to deliver you from the wrath of God.

Romans 10:9 says, “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.”

You have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now heed the warning given in this verse: It would be better to have never known the way of righteousness than to know, and to turn from this holy commandment. Gospel knowledge carries with it a tremendous responsibility.

The false teachers that are being talked about in this chapter know the way of righteousness. They are not ignorant. They have had some level of exposure to the “way of righteousness,” but they have turned from it. They have willfully and knowingly rejected the true gospel and worse still they teach a false gospel through

which they claim to offer liberty to others while they themselves are the slaves of sin.

False teachers are full of empty promises and they teach a false gospel. They claim to have escaped from the pollutions of this world. They claim to know the way of righteousness. Yet they are given over to all manner of sin. They revel in their sin and seek to draw others into sin as well.

Are these the marks of believers? Can men be saved and yet live like these false teachers? They claim to be Christians, but are they? In the final verse of this chapter Peter tells us that false teachers act according to their nature.

III. False Teachers Act According to Their Nature (v. 22)

Verse 22 says, “But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.”

What is really going on with these false teachers? It’s not what they claim. It’s not what was talked about in the previous verses. It’s not that they escaped from sin through the grace of God in salvation, but then fell into bondage again. They did not have salvation and then lose it.

False teachers are simply acting according to their nature. Peter illustrates this with two simple proverbs. The first is of a dog which returns to it’s own vomit.

A dog is a dog, and it will act according to its nature. You can lead a dog away from its vomit, but it is in the dog's nature to return. If you let the dog go, it will return to the vomit and consume it again.

The second proverb is about a pig, that, after being washed, returns to wallow in the mire. A pig is a pig and it will act according to its nature. You can take a pig out of the mire and wash the mire away, but it is in the pig's nature to return. If you let the pig go, it will return to wallowing in the mire.

It is no coincidence that both the animals mentioned here are unclean according to the Law of Moses. They are unclean by nature. It's not the vomit that makes the dog unclean. It's not the mire that makes the pig unclean. They are unclean by their very nature, and even when removed from the vomit and the mire, they are still unclean. They experience no change in nature, and so when given opportunity they return to their filth.

The point of these illustrations is clear: the apostasy of false teachers demonstrates their true nature. You and I can't know what is truly in the heart of another person. That is not our domain. That belongs to God and God alone, but we can recognize false teachers by their works.

Jesus taught this exact same thing with a very similar illustration in Matthew 7:15-20, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth

good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”

If someone looks like a false teachers, sounds like a false teachers, and acts like a false teacher, what are they? They are a false teacher.

False teachers can appear, for a time, to have reformed and to have some level of godliness, but don't be distressed when their sin is revealed. This isn't a poor reflection on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as if the true gospel of Jesus wasn't enough to keep these ones from falling. No. Like the dog returning to its vomit and the sow to her mire, so false teachers are simply revealing their true nature. False teachers do the things they do because they never truly knew the Lord.

False teachers. They are full of empty promises. They present a false gospel. And their actions reveal their true nature as enemies of God and the church.