



FALSE
TEACHERS



JUDGMENT



TRUTH



STAND FIRM



REMEMBER

2 PETER 2.1-11

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

T. M. Moore

The Fellowship of Ailbe

A ReVision Resource

Truth and Consequences: 2 Peter 2.1-11
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2 Peter 2.1-11: Introduction

As if suffering persecution weren't enough, the churches to which Peter was writing were also afflicted with false teachers.

False teachers don't actually announce themselves as such. They simply reserve the right to interpret and teach the Bible according to their own best ideas, rather than the whole counsel of God. They appeal to an "easy" path of discipleship, one marked by convenience and self-interest. This is a path to destruction, and believers are well-advised to beware of false teachers and to stay clear of them.

False teachers encourage people to seek an easy way of following Christ. They don't let the Word of God speak for itself. Instead, they presume to stand above the Word, rather than under it, and to insist they know better even than the apostles what the Bible actually teaches.

But, as God brought judgment on false teaching in the past, Peter warns, He will do so again. We need to cling to the truth of Scripture and steer clear of all teachers who believe they have the last word on the Gospel and its meaning for our lives.

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1 and 2 Peter can encourage, embolden, and instruct us, if we're willing to take the Apostle's words to heart. My prayer is that all who take up this study will do just that. Thank you for joining us.

T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

1 False Prophets

2 Peter 2.1

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.

The Story: The problem with false teachers, of course, is that they do not advertise themselves as such. Instead, they come using the language of faith, claiming the Word of God as their authority, and displaying all the trappings of true teachers. Yet subtle perversions of truth pepper their instruction, undermining the message of the Gospel and the hope of salvation, and, typically, substituting for the Gospel of the Kingdom some form of a gospel of self-interest and works.

These people seem to “arise” out of nowhere, “secretly” insinuating themselves into Christian circles, until they are able to draw away a following and thus make a claim to the truth. Their teachings, Peter insists, are destructive – of truth, of salvation, of hope, and of true discipleship. They may even deny crucial aspects of the Gospel – as, for example, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which many liberal theologians and pastors continue to deny, even as they lead their congregations in worship week after week. False teachers are storing up judgment against themselves. Our task is to be so grounded in the Word of truth that we are able to discern the voice of the Lord and leave the chaff to blow away by itself.

The Structure: There have always been false teachers parading around in the guise of truth-bearers, and it falls to church leaders, like Peter, to equip their flocks and warn them of the dangers, lest they be led astray. Even today the spirit of the age has penetrated and shaped the teaching of certain pastors to such an extent that their gospel has lost its true focus on Christ and His Kingdom and centers instead on the wants and needs of people. Christ did not die and rise again to make us prosperous or happy, but to bring us to God, so that, in lives of self-denial and sacrifice, we might glorify Him by dying to ourselves and living for others.

How do you determine whether the preaching and teaching you hear each week is true to the Gospel?

2 Following Destructive Ways

2 Peter 2.2, 3

² And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

The Story: Because false teachers are very subtle, it can be difficult to know when one is being led astray. Peter suggests some things to be alert for in what others teach. Does their teaching appeal primarily to sensuality — that is to gratifying merely fleshly desires or longings? Do their lives indicate a desire for material possessions — that is, do they show by their lifestyles that they are greedy for wealth and things? And are they impervious to challenge or disagreement — do they insist that their words are the right words, so that they beat their followers into submission to whatever they insist is true?

When you find yourself being taught by such a person, you should take heed. These false teachers were condemned long ago — before the foundations of the world, in fact. And that condemnation still stands. They may seem to be prospering now, and so to enjoy a measure of divine favor, but judgment is working against them and will catch up to them soon enough. You don't want to be hanging around them when it does.

The Structure: In our day it has been fashionable for certain preachers and teachers to insist that the blessing of God comes in the form of good health and overall prosperity. That would have come as news to Jesus, I think, who owned nothing and gave up His life for our salvation. Different ages of the Church feature different kinds of false teachers. In some eras the emphasis was just the opposite as in ours. In every era we must seek to emulate the Berean believers, who received Paul's teaching with eager and ready minds, but who searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether what he was teaching was really the truth (Acts 17.11).

Are your daily disciplines of reading and meditation sufficient to equip you to recognize false teaching? How might you encourage your fellow believers in a more "Berean"-like attitude?

3 Angels in Chains

2 Peter 2.4

For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment...

The Story: We should be warned against following false teachers by the example of the fallen angels. They allowed themselves to be persuaded by Satan that following him was to be preferred to clinging to the truth of God. As a result, a third of the angelic host was cast out of heaven, deprived of eternal privileges, and sealed for doom forever (cf. Rev. 12.1-9). Note, too, that Peter says these angels have been “committed to chains of gloomy darkness.” This is an accomplished fact, not something yet to be. It seems to me there are two aspects of this.

First, these angels no longer have the privilege of dwelling in the light of Christ or the glory of God. They have permanently deprived themselves of the very thing for which they were created. Second, they are restrained from preventing the Lord’s purposes coming to pass; they cannot stand against Him as He plunders Satan’s holdings and builds His Church (Matt. 12.22-29; 16.18). They are defeated, though still dangerous. We should learn from their condemnation what awaits all those who forsake the truth to follow the slick and sensual teaching of false prophets. As surely as God condemned them, He will condemn all who turn away from His truth.

The Structure: The intense spiritual warfare in which we are engaged in this age of restoration (Eph. 6.10-20) does not typically take the horrifying and spectacular form frequently depicted in film and Christian fiction. Most of the time we are simply being wooed away from truth by persuasive voices that appeal to self-interest and the opportunity to, in effect, be like God. The same charmer who deceived our first parents is still at work today, and though he and his followers are restrained by grace and the progress of the divine economy, we still need to be alert to them, testing every spirit and every voice that claims to be teaching the Word of truth.

Suggest some broad outlines of a test for anything you might hear or read which claims to be the truth of God.

4 Remember the Flood

2 Peter 2.5

...and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly...

The Story: God's judgment against false teaching and sin is not restricted to events in the heavens. We need only recall the events of the flood to remember how the wrath of God can suddenly break out against a sinful world. We note here that Peter makes no attempt to qualify his understanding of the flood. He seems to accept the Genesis account at face value, and that augurs well for our doing so, too. The flood speaks to us of the wrath of God, but it also reminds of His grace, and that in two ways.

First, Noah and seven others were saved. Was it because they were so good? Not according to Genesis 6. All the human race had become troublesome to God, presumably, including Noah. But Noah "found favor" with God; God reached to him and his family with grace, after which Noah became a herald of righteousness, calling his generation to repent and be saved. This is the second evidence of God's grace. In our day the judgment of God is ready to fall on those who turn from His truth. Let us plead with God for grace to rescue and spare us, and for the courage to call others to stand with us in the truth.

The Structure: In a real sense, our purpose in life boils down to these two poles of grace: seeking the grace of God and proclaiming it. None of us deserves exemption from divine wrath. We have all, in many ways, turned from God's truth to our own, selfish ideas about what's best for us. Daily confession, repentance, and renewal in God's grace is the antidote to lingering sin. But we must also celebrate the grace and goodness of God before the people of our age, calling them to repentance and faith in the Gospel, so that they might join us in the ark of the Church and know the safety of God's loving provision and truth.

What does this twofold mission – seeking grace and proclaiming it – look like in a typical day of your life?

5 Oppressed by Sin?

2 Peter 2.6-8

6 ...and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; 7 and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked 8 (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)—

The Story: We have to go back to verse 4 to pick up the “if” which is governing this conditional clause: “If” God did this, “turning the cities...” Further, this is not the subjunctive mood, the mood of possibility, but the indicative, the mood of fact. So “if” is probably better translated, “since.” Since God also judged Sodom and Gomorrah, we should fear lest He should do the same in our day. Sometimes Christians act like there is no historical continuity between the Old and New Testaments, or the Bible and our own time.

We see God doing certain things then that, we have somehow come to believe, He doesn’t do any more. Peter is trying to warn us against embracing that little bit of false teaching. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever; He hates sin as much today as He ever has. We must not be cavalier or indifferent to false teaching and its sinful effects. Lot was “oppressed” because sin tormented his soul. Does it torment ours?

The Structure: Hating sin is a high and holy calling (Ps. 97.10). It’s not something we talk much about these days – “hate” being a “four-letter” word and all. But the people of God are called to hate sin – to hate it in themselves, to hate the destruction it brings on others, to hate the false teaching that encourages or blinks at or rationalizes sin in any way. The sooner we work at hating sin in our hearts, the more we will learn to love God and His truth.

What would you suggest as a way of nurture holy hatred for sin in your own life? Among your Christian friends?

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T. M. Moore

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6 He Knows What He's Doing

2 Peter 2.9, 10a

⁹ ...then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, ¹⁰ and especially those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority.

The Story: We recall that these congregations, to whom Peter was writing, were experiencing persecution. Peter connects their trials in that vein with the “temptations” of having to deal with false teachers (the Greek word for “trials” and “temptations” is the same word). Each is equally hurtful, and each must be prepared for if we are to stand firm in the Lord. God can help us in dealing with false prophets as surely as He can keep us through the trials of persecution.

In either situation, we must look to Him in faith, hoping for His help and deliverance, and trusting in Him to bring His judgment against all who transgress, even as He rescues those who continue to look to Him in faith. The “especially” of v. 10a reconnects the passage with false teachers, who seek sensuality and practice greed, and who “despise authority” – here, the authority of God’s Word and the sound teaching passed on by the Church in every age.

The Structure: We are reminded of the God Who is Immanuel – “with us” in every trial and difficulty to rescue and keep us by His grace. If we did not have this comfort we could not persevere in this age of restoration, for the trials are many and difficult, and we are but frail flesh. Looking to God daily for reviving and renewing grace must be the constant practice of every true believer. God knows what He’s doing in allowing us to undergo trials (cf. 1 Pet. 1.7), and we must learn to rest in His sovereign goodness, power, and grace.

How would you counsel a new believer to practice the sovereign presence of God in the midst of trials and difficulties?

7 To Speak Evil of Dignitaries

2 Peter 2.10b, 11

They are presumptuous, self-willed. They are not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries, ¹¹ whereas angels, who are greater in power and might, do not bring a reviling accusation against them before the Lord.

The Story: Now there is a certain amount of mystery and uncertainty involved in this text. Peter was privy to information about heavenly matters that we don't find elsewhere in Scripture. I think we can understand this passage if we keep it in context. "[P]resumptuous and self-willed" obviously refers to the false teachers who "despise authority" (10a). The "authority" here is doubtless that of the Scriptures and the Church, especially the apostles. False teachers set themselves up as the final authority on matters of faith and practice, and they don't feel constrained to account for their teaching or conduct by submitting to all the counsel of God in Scripture or the historic teaching of the Church.

So they "speak evil of dignitaries," that is, those who have been entrusted with divine revelation, either in first giving it (the apostles) or in faithfully teaching it to the Church. False teachers don't feel a need to be accountable to anyone other than their own views, which they piously couch in very spiritual language ("God told me..." "The Spirit has spoken to me..." And so forth.). Not even angels are that stupid, Peter says – and they have a lot more real power and might than those who blaspheme before the Lord by their false teaching.

The Structure: The age in which we live, the age in which God, by His grace is restoring all things to Himself through our Lord Jesus Christ, is all of a piece. We are one with those who have gone before and those who will follow after us. Look for false teachers to set themselves apart as *sui generis* in some sense. They don't know or care what the Church has taught in the past. They reserve the right to make up their own rules about how to interpret the Bible. They recognize only the authority "of the Spirit" as they spout their false and blasphemous views into the hearts and minds of unguarded, trusting followers.

What should we expect of those who teach when it comes to positioning their views within the larger context of the body of faithful teaching from the Church in all ages?

For reflection or discussion

1. What advice would you give for recognizing false teaching in the church?
2. Why is false teaching so dangerous? How does it harm a believer? A local church?
3. Peter insisted that God judges false teachers and those who follow them. But is that judgment always immediately evident? What are some ways we might expect to see God's judgment come on false teachers and their followers?
4. Peter argues that we need to submit to the Word, standing *under* its authority rather than *over* it. What's the difference, and how can you tell which position you're in at any given time?
5. In studying the Bible, what are the important disciplines or protocols to follow that can keep us from falling prey to false teaching?
6. What advice would you give to a new believer whom you were encouraging to get started reading and studying the Bible? What help might you give such a person?

Prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.