

False Prophets

2 Peter 2:1-3

In the thinking of the modern mind, there is no such thing as truth. In the philosophy of our day, often called “post-modernism,” there is no such thing as truth, at least in any absolute sense. Nothing is true. Nothing is false. There are no such black and white standards with which to identify and label. What is true can be false, and what is false can be true. And that makes it particularly difficult to proclaim the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, because that gospel itself claims to be the truth. And Jesus Christ himself claims to be the truth. “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” That is the gospel!

So we need to confront the modern mind and the philosophy of post-modernism, because it is empty and hollow. There is such a thing as truth, and we studied it two weeks ago.

2Pet. 1:19 “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

And what is that word of the prophets? The Holy Scriptures! Which originated with God, and are therefore, God’s word.

2 Pet. 1:20 “...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

And since there is such a thing as truth, I must also say that there is such a thing as error. Truth, by definition, means that there is untruth. I hope you follow that logic, and I think that you understand it. If this is true, and this contradicts this, then this is not true! Simple, basic, straightforward logic.

And so Peter moves on from that which is true to that which is untrue. Having defined the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible, that “holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit,” now he describes men who do not speak from God and who have no influence from the Holy Spirit. But the dangerous thing about these men is that they claim that they do. They claim that they do speak for God. They are false prophets.

v.1

We’ll look first at,

I. THE ERROR OF FALSE PROPHETS.

The contrast is obvious. Chapter two begins with the word “but.” Peter is introducing an obvious antithesis, holding one thing up against the other as absolute opposites. Here is truth, he has declared. The prophecy of Scripture.

And here is falsehood. Here is error. Just as there were true and false prophets in the Old Covenant, so there will be in the New. Just as the nation of Israel had to contend with false prophets, so will the church of Jesus Christ.

v.1

And from that OT context, what was the primary identification of a false prophet?

A. False prophets are those who wrongly claim to speak for God.

It’s pretty easy to explain from the writings of the OT. False prophecy was a very serious offense.

Deut. 13:1 “If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 “and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying,

‘Let us go after other gods’--which you have not known--‘and let us serve them,’ 3 "you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 "You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice, and you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him. 5 "But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has spoken in order to turn you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage, to entice you from the way in which the LORD your God commanded you to walk. So you shall put away the evil from your midst.”

Also, Deut. 18:20 “But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’ 21 "And if you say in your heart, ‘How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’-- 22 "when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not happen or come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”

And speaking of Israel, Israel says,

Ezek. 22:26 “Her priests have violated My law and profaned My holy things; they have not distinguished between the holy and unholy, nor have they made known the difference between the unclean and the clean; and they have hidden their eyes from My Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. 27 "Her princes in her midst are like wolves tearing the prey, to shed blood, to destroy people, and to get dishonest gain. 28 "Her prophets plastered them with untempered mortar, seeing false visions, and divining lies for them, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD,’ when the LORD had not spoken.”

That’s a false prophet. One who says, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says’—when the LORD has not spoken. False prophets are those who wrongly claim to speak for God.

Now, in one sense, false prophets are easy to spot today, because they are foolish enough to publicly claim to speak a word of prophecy from God, only to see their prophecy fail to come true. That is a serious, serious offense against the truth of God, the sufficiency of the Scriptures, and the glory of Jesus Christ.

But there are more subtle examples today, too, those whom Peter identifies simply as false teachers. They may not be claiming to speak for God, in the sense of prophecy, but they do claim to be teaching God’s word. And yet they don’t believe it themselves. They think themselves speaking for God, or at least teaching in God’s name, but they are wrong. There are many in the visible church of today who don’t even know God. Many false teachers who are not even born again, who don’t have a saving relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Then there are those who might well be saved, but who are still ignorant of God’s word and yet arrogant enough to teach!

Those who teach are warned,

James 3:1 “My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment.”

False prophets are those who wrongly claim to speak for God, or wrongly claim to teach in his name. And in that teaching, they deny the truth.

B. False teachers are those who deny the truth of the Scripture.

Notice how Peter defines it.

v.1 “...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.”

“They will secretly bring in destructive heresies.” Now there is a word you don’t hear much today. Heresies. In the Greek, the word means something that you choose, or that which is chosen. It is an opinion that you choose yourself. The idea is that it is a self-willed opinion. That is, something chosen by your own will which is contrary to the revealed will of God found in the written words of Scripture. And so the word came to mean quite definitely, false teaching. False, as defined by the truth of Scripture.

Simply put, as an application for all of us, you are not given the freedom to choose for yourself whether or not to believe what you find in the Scripture. You are not given the opportunity to decide for yourself whether or not Scripture is true. We must submit to its truth implicitly. Without reservation. Without question. And without hesitation.

False teachers are those who deny the truth of Scriptures. They are those who do claim to identify error in the Bible. They contradict the Bible and they deny it’s authority as absolute truth.

And there are horrible consequences of starting down that path. They will eventually even deny “the sovereign Lord who bought them,” a reference no doubt to Jesus Christ. Once you deny the absolute truthfulness of Scripture, once you start down that path, you are headed in a direction that leads to a denial of Jesus himself. And in many cases, in many places, it already has. Plenty of examples in church history of that, both ancient and modern.

It begins so very subtly, just as Peter says. “They will secretly introduce destructive heresies.” Secretly, they slip in their false teaching unawares. Literally, the words means to smuggle something in, or creeping in under cover. To slip in unnoticed. Notice how Jude describes it.

Jude 3 “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. 4 For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Indeed, the church of Jesus Christ today must constantly be on guard against such false teaching, and it is particularly difficult today because there is so little emphasis given to doctrinal teaching and catechetical instruction. It’s easy to sneak false teaching into the church, because we aren’t all that secure in our knowledge of true teaching.

But there is always one huge red flag, one obvious and consistent warning for you to note. Don’t ever listen to a teacher who denies the truth of what the Bible says in any form whatsoever. For such a man, or such a woman, is a false teacher.

So how do they operate? What are,

II. THE METHODS OF FALSE PROPHETS?

What’s there MO? Well, I’ve just identified the first tactic.

A. False prophets act secretly.

They slip in among us without our even knowing that it

happened. I could list many such examples, but suffice it to say that the church of our day is very gullible and very unsuspecting when we incorporate ideas into our doctrine that originated with unbelievers. We have, in many instances, allowed such cleverly invented stories to become an acceptable part of our doctrine.

That is the basic trouble with a denial of the doctrine of creation. Alternate theories were formulated in order to take into account the so-called scientific facts of evolution! And those alternate theories snuck in unawares. And the church of our day often struggles to get rid of them now that they are in!

The same can be said about a lot of secular psychological teachings, teachings which were brought into the church in the 60's and 70's, teachings and doctrines which originated with unbelievers. It can be very difficult to identify the errors of some of the false teachings.

The same can be said for a lot modern church growth teachings, and the appeals to secular marketing principles and secular business structures. The origin of those teachings isn't the Bible.

We could mention all sorts of moral and ethical evils, too. Homosexual marriage certainly tops the list in our day. And abortion. Those sorts of things didn't happen overnight! They came in secretly. They slipped in among us, and they are much harder to get out than to let in.

False prophets act secretly. And we are very appropriately warned.

Matt. 7:15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves."

Then, according to Peter,

B. False prophets appeal to sensual desires.

v.2

They follow their destructive ways. They have shameful ways. Literally, it is a reference to sensuality. Or unbridled living, habitual lasciviousness and licentiousness that stands as the exact opposite of self-control. Unrestrained sexual immorality is particularly in view with this word. And it is no surprise that churches and denominations that gave up a commitment to the infallible truthfulness of God's word a generation ago are now giving up a commitment to the sanctity of marriage and sexual purity. False teaching will inevitably lead to immorality. Errors in what you believe will inevitably lead to errors in how you live.

Notice how Jude describes this appeal.

Jude 4 "For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ."

Clearly, false teachers of every age appeal to sensual desires. They appeal to what feels good, to what is attractive and interesting to the physical senses, the lusts of the flesh.

That is such a dangerous appeal today, for we live in such a sensual age. We think and act according to how we feel. The television advertisers know that, so advertising is much more about making you feel something that transmitting any information to you. Church marketers know this too, so the appeal often goes out in an invitation to church as an appeal to the senses, to sensual desires, even it is just couched in the language of making you feel comfortable.

Many have gone the whole way down that route, allowing even the most perverse forms of immorality to be acceptable. False prophets will appeal to such sensual desires.

In that,

C. False prophets bring dishonor to God's true people.

I think, at times, that is intentional. At other times, it is unintentional, though no less real.

v.2b

The way of the truth is blasphemed. Those who hold to the truth of God's word are maligned. They are mocked, insulted, ridiculed, defamed, and brought into disrepute.

Interesting, isn't it, that those of us who proclaim the truth of God's word particularly as it applies to moral issues are the ones who are being maligned. The clearest example of that today is the whole context of the public debate regarding the acceptability of homosexuality. The church which believes the Bible and identifies the sinfulness of homosexuality is accused of hatred! On par in the thinking of many to those who advocate extreme racial prejudice to the point of hateful violence.

How can this be?

v.1-2

Peter goes on to identify attitude, motivation.

D. False prophets will be motivated by greed.

Covetousness.

v.3a

Now, certainly not every false teachers is motivated by greed. This isn't a universal identification for every false prophet. But it is common. And it is part of what Peter warns us about. Greed.

And what does greed lead to? What does a man do when he is motivated by greed? He takes advantage of people. He exploits them.

E. False prophets will take advantage of those who are vulnerable.

Look at the words more closely.

"They will exploit you." That word exploit comes from the business world, referring to one who travels on business. It bears the negative connotation associated with a traveling salesman, the man who will make up any story he can think of in order to close a sale. The Greek word does include the sense of cheating, making an undue profit at someone else's expense, exploiting them for your own personal gain.

The seller is interested only in making a profit, and the old adage is necessary advice--let the buyer beware. The trouble is, many buyers are not able to beware. And just as in the marketplace, many gullible people are taken in by manipulative and high pressure salesman, so it is in the church. False teachers will exploit you, motivated by their greed.

Need I even mention the host of preachers on television. How shamelessly they exploit the weaknesses and vulnerability of people for their own financial profit. It is disgusting. "In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up."

It's not a pretty picture, is it? But remember, Peter's warning is that these false teachers will sneak in among you. You won't immediately identify their false motives. You won't necessarily feel like you are being exploited. You won't sense that you are being dishonored. And you might not realize that the appeal is to

your sensual desires.

So the point is, wake up! Start to see those things. Learn to identify sensual appeals. Learn to identify greed. Learn to know when you are being taken advantage of. And of course, resist such false teachers and false teaching.

Again, to make reference to Jude, “contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” The whole sentence begins,

Jude 3 “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Jude then gives an urgent exhortation.

Jude 17 “But you, beloved, remember the words which were spoken before by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ: 18 how they told you that there would be mockers in the last time who would walk according to their own ungodly lusts. 19 These are sensual persons, who cause divisions, not having the Spirit. 20 But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, 21 keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.”

And he ends with a great encouragement,

Jude 24 “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, 25 To God our Savior, Who alone is wise, Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever. Amen.”

Peter ends with a great encouragement also, which focuses on,

III. THE PUNISHMENT OF FALSE PROPHETS.

v.3b

That same judgement was referred to also in,
v.1b

The encouragement is that ultimately, the false prophets won’t succeed. They won’t destroy the church. They won’t prevail. Instead, they will be judged. And in Peter’s mind,

A. God’s judgment will be swift and sure.

v.1b “...and bring on themselves swift destruction.”

That is God’s promise. That is our assurance. Their judgment is certain. In the words at the end of verse 3, “their judgement has not been idle.” It will happen. God will not permit these wicked men to escape their punishment.

In fact, the verdict has already been rendered. It has already been pronounced on them. Peter says that,

v.3 “...their destruction does not slumber.”

It will not wait. It has long been hanging over them.”

God announced his condemnation upon the false prophets long ago. And that judgment hangs upon them continuously, emphasizing that it will come to pass. That is the subject of the following verses which we’ll study next week, where Peter teaches that God will,

v.9 “...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. They are presumptuous, self-willed.”

Again, Jude gives us a good cross-reference.

Jude 5 “But I want to remind you, though you once knew this, that the Lord, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. 6 And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day; 7 as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

God’s judgment of punishment has already been declared, and that is our great hope for the church of Jesus Christ. With the confidence of that great hope, may we be zealous as we “contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”

And we have help. The help of the Holy Spirit. And so I’ll end with the words of John, who gives us this encouragement in the face of false teachers.

1 John 2:20 “But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. 21 I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. 22 Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. 23 Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also. 24 Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. 25 And this is the promise that He has promised us--eternal life.”

1 John 2:26 “These things I have written to you concerning

those who try to deceive you. 27 But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.

Let me go back to emphasize that which is sure and certain, 2 Peter 1:20 “...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

There is truth. And there is untruth. God’s word defines them both. God’s word is truth. And Jesus is the truth.