



Part 5 – Recognizing False Teachers

2 Peter 2:10b-16

Peter dedicates a large portion of his letter warning the church that, just like false prophets in the past, false teachers have arisen within the church (2:1-3). He has announced their current and final judgment (2:3-9). He reveals that they are driven by “the lust of defiling passion” and they “despise authority” and that their hearts are “bold and willful” (vs. 10).

“This is precisely why such a large part of the Bible is devoted to exposing the subtleties of false prophets and teachers – their power lies in their appeal. So, a vital element in Christian maturity is the ability to see beyond outward appearances and recognize the difference between what is true and what is false.”¹ Though Peter’s criticism of the false teachers is harsh, he is not being gratuitous or angrily self-indulgent. Rather, the apostle is demonstrating proper indignation over those who lead God’s people astray.

1. You will recognize them by their false teaching.

- Let us not miss the obvious. The first way to recognize false teachers is that they teach error. Specifically, they teach “destructive heresies” (2:1). And the ability to recognize this trait rests upon our knowledge of God’s Word and sound doctrine. Three times in verses 10-13 Peter uses the word “blaspheme” to describe the works of the false teachers. The most consequential problem with heresy is that it attacks the glory of God. When it comes to false teachers it is not a matter of picking the bones out of the meat. The problem with false teachers is that they introduce poison into the well.
- Like a good pastor, Peter’s aim is to prepare his hearers to stand on the Day of Judgment. In contrast, the false teachers seek only to “entice unsteady souls” (vs. 14). The word “unsteady” in verse 14 is the antithesis of the aim of a faithful pastor/teacher whose goal is to give God’s people a firm foundation. Paul sought to build up the Ephesian church so that they would not be “tossed about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14).
- One of the reasons false teachers are able to find their way into the church is because they mix in enough truth and Christian language that the less discerning are easily fooled. False teachers gain influence in part by incorporating doses of truth into their errors. To many, they will sound “Christian.” They are skilled in presenting false dichotomies and half-truths. But a half-truth masquerading as a whole-truth is a whole error.

2. You will recognize them by their stubborn arrogance.

- **Vs. 10b** – “Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones...” – The words translated “bold” and “willful” are essentially synonymous. “They function together to draw a picture of ‘arrogant audacity’...[Their] arrogance is manifested in their not being afraid to ‘slander celestial beings.’”²
- Exactly who “the glorious ones” are has long been subject of debate. Some have suggested that they are the apostles and/or pastors of the churches, assuming the term translated “glorious ones” (lit. *glories*) is simply a title of honor for the church’s leaders. But it seems best to take this as a reference to angels. Many scholars hold that Peter is referring to fallen angels. That may sound strange to our ears given the way that we hear the term “glorious.” But the word Peter uses (*glories*) is probably best taken as a general reference to spiritual (or, *celestial*) beings. Indeed, the term is never used to refer specifically to the holy angels. And given the close connection between 2 Peter and Jude, there is a strong argument to be made in favor of the view that Peter is referring to fallen angels (demons).³
- Peter and Jude seem to both be drawing upon a particular Hebrew tradition in which the archangel Michael and Satan disputed over possession of Moses’ body:

“But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, *he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, “The Lord rebuke you”* (Jude 9).

¹ Mark Johnson, *Let’s Study 2 Peter & Jude* (Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 2005) p. 43

² Douglas Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) p. 121

³ See Douglas Moo, Thomas Schreiner, Richard Baukham

- **Verse 11** – “Whereas angels....” – Notice how Peter seems to be contrasting “the glorious ones” reviled by false teachers with the holy “angels” here.⁴ The “blasphemous judgment” pronounced by the false teachers is either their denial of demons which could fit, given that they are denying the return of Jesus and the future judgment. Or, it could mean that they possess an arrogant audacity toward Satan and demons having been puffed up by their own spiritual pride. Not even the holy angels boast about themselves though they possess great power. Many false teachers today present themselves as swaggering prize fighters gloating in their supposed power over demons.

3. You will recognize them by their ungodliness.

As he did in verses 1-10a Peter continues to identify sexual immorality and greed as the chief sins of the false teachers.

Immorality

- **Vs. 12** – Peter compares their immoral behavior to the instinctual behavior of animals. They act on base desires rather than reason. They “blaspheme about matters of which they are ignorant.” The New Testament never presents ignorance as morally neutral. Ignorance of righteousness is always, in one way or another, willful (Romans 1&2). There is irony in the fact that these false teachers who deny a coming judgment “will also be destroyed in their destruction.”
- **Vs. 13** – “Suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing...” – The false teachers will not ultimately take pleasure in the wages of their wrongdoing. As their degrading passions go from bad to worse, they begin practicing their sin in broad daylight. Sadly, the church has welcomed these false teachers into their fellowship even though they are blemishes upon the church’s witness.
- **Vs. 14a-c** – The word translated “entice” has the same root as the word for hunting. False teachers seek out, or hunt for “unsteady souls.” They bait the ignorant and unsteady with false doctrine and false promises that will fit their misguided desires. We need not be shocked at the world-wide popularity of the prosperity false teachers. Such heresies are enticing bait.

Greed

- **Vs. 14d** – “They have hearts trained for greed.” – Greed is often the fruit of training. Like sexual lust, the lust for material goods often comes about by a practiced gaze. It is the fruit of the lasting look. Like most greedy people, the false teachers are greedy because they’ve trained themselves to be. They have chosen to look longingly at the world’s prizes and it has produced in them a covetous heart. In contrast to this, we are meant to set our hearts on things above and to treasure what cannot decay.
- **Vv. 15-16** – Having known the right way, they have deliberately chosen the wrong. This makes them doubly accountable to the Lord’s justice.
- Peter appeals to Balaam as an example of the same sorts of greed that the false teachers are guilty of. Balaam once sold his services to pagan king of Moab in an attempt to curse the people of Israel and keep them from occupying the land (Numbers 22). As one commentator observes: “Balaam, perhaps more than any other preacher in Israel’s history, set his voice, his eyes, and his heart on God-forsaken ways...He was the leading voice that led the sexual revolution forward during the days when Moses shepherded the people upon the plains (Numbers 31:16).”⁵

What makes the church vulnerable to false teachers:

- 1) Ignorance or indifference to doctrine.
 - Doctrinal indifferentism always opens the door for false teaching.
- 2) Emphasizing utilitarianism over truth.
 - “Does it work for me,” versus, “Is this true?”
- 3) Misguided notions of what is “practical.”
 - Doctrinal instruction is viewed as impractical and so it is discarded.
- 4) Niceness over love.
 - When notions of niceness overtake the harder work of love, truth telling is neglected.

⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, TNAC (Nashville, B&H, 2003) pp. 347ff

⁵ David Helm, *1&2 Peter & Jude*, PTW (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) p. 235