BEWARE OF FALSE TEACHERS!

2 Peter 2:1-3

By

Steven J. Cole

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2 Peter, Lesson 8

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2 Peter 2:1-3

When you think of cruelty, you probably think of terrorists blowing up innocent people or of evil parents abusing a little child. But you probably wouldn’t think of heresy. Some years ago I read a book with the intriguing title, The Cruelty of Heresy [Morehouse Publishing, 1994], by FitzSimons Allison. While in my estimation, he focuses too much on the temporal rather than the eternal consequences of heresy, his title is still provocative: heresy is cruel. It destroys lives for time and eternity.

In the same vein, John MacArthur (The MacArthur Study Bible, New American Standard Updated Edition [Nelson Bibles], pp. 1924, 1925) writes, “Nothing is more wicked than for someone to claim to speak for God to the salvation of souls when in reality he speaks for Satan to the damnation of souls.” Those who promote heresy are the ultimate terrorists in that they deceive people to follow a path that leads to the eternal terrors of hell.

At the end of chapter 1, Peter lays out the foundation for our faith, which is the inspired Word of God. He knows that he is about to pass off the scene and he wants his readers to stand firmly on the truth of God’s Word. But he also knows that false prophets are a perpetual threat to God’s people. So in contrast to the godly prophets who spoke for God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit, he begins chapter 2 by contrasting them with the false prophets who have plagued God’s people down through the ages.

Some understand Peter’s use of the future tense in our text to mean that the false teachers were not yet present in the churches. But later (2:13, 15, 17; 3:5) Peter indicates that they are already there. So by using the future tense Peter probably is alluding to prophecies by Jesus that pointed to the coming of these false teachers (Thomas Schreiner, The New American Commentary, 1, 2, Peter, Jude [Broadman Publishers], p. 327; Michael Green, The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude [Eerdmans], p. 93). The Lord knew that they would come. Their presence does not negate His sovereign control over His church.
It’s interesting that in 2 Peter 2 there are no direct exhortations or commands. Rather, Peter just describes the false teachers and their evil ways at length. It’s as if he is holding up a Most Wanted Poster with some hideous, evil-looking characters, saying, “This is what these guys look like, so watch out for them!” So chapter 2 serves as a warning. In our text, Peter is saying,

**Beware of false teachers because they leave a trail of spiritual devastation in their wake!**

Peter gives us seven reasons to beware of false teachers:

1. **Beware of false teachers because they are a perpetual threat to God’s people.**

   “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you ….” The first phrase refers back to the history of God’s people in the Old Testament. Satan is a liar and the father of lies. He deceived Eve in the garden and he has used false teachers to deceive the unsuspecting ever since.

   In Deuteronomy 13, Moses warned Israel about false prophets who would deceive by performing signs and wonders to get people to go after false gods. He sees this as so severe a threat that he says that even if it is your brother, your child, or even the wife you cherish, you must not follow him or her after these false gods. Rather, you must not have pity on him, but must expose him so that he can be put to death (Deut. 13:6-10). That seems extreme to us, because our age is so tolerant of false doctrine. We shrug it off as not being a big deal. But Moses knew that false teachers would infect many, causing irreparable damage to God’s people.

   It’s significant that Peter says that these false teachers will be “among you.” Paul warned the Ephesian elders of the same thing (Acts 20:29-30), “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.” He goes on to warn them to be on the alert. False teachers arise from within the church and often do a lot of damage before they are confronted. If they leave, they invariably take a lot of people with them who are angry at the church for being so unloving and judgmental.
It is true that Christians have wrongly divided over minor doctrinal disputes, personality conflicts, and other petty issues. Such divisions are sin. But it is also a sin to minimize doctrine to the point where in the name of love and unity, we tolerate false teachers who deny the fundamental doctrines of the faith. These foundational truths include the triune nature of God; the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ; His virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary atonement on the cross, bodily resurrection, ascension, and personal return. Also, we cannot waver on the essentials of the gospel: that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. Underlying all of these truths is the divine inspiration, authority and complete infallibility of the Bible.

J. C. Ryle, the godly 19th century Anglican bishop, wrote (Warnings to the Churches [Banner of Truth], pp. 110-111),

Controversy in religion is a hateful thing. It is hard enough to fight the devil, the world and the flesh, without private differences in our own camp. But there is one thing which is worse than controversy—and that is false doctrine tolerated, allowed, and permitted without protest .... Three things there are which men never ought to trifle with—a little poison, a little false doctrine, and a little sin.

So just because someone claims to be an evangelical pastor or evangelist does not mean that he is sound in the faith. False teachers have always arisen from within the church. Beware!

2. **Beware of false teachers because their methods are subtle and deceptive.**

Peter says (v. 1) that these false teachers “will secretly introduce destructive heresies.” They will use (v. 3) “false words.” We get our word “plastic” from the Greek word for “false.” It meant, “made up,” or “fabricated.” The false teachers were accusing Peter and the apostles of following “cleverly devised tales” (1:16), but Peter counters by saying that they are making up their own stories and doctrines. In contrast to the inspired prophets and apostles, who wrote down God’s revealed truth in His Word, these false teachers were tools of Satan to promote deception.

The Greek word translated “secretly introduce” means to bring in from outside. They add worldly concepts to the Bible and
give them the same authority as Scripture. One example of this from recent years is the concept of “self-esteem,” or “loving yourself.” That idea did not come into the church from the Bible. You will search in vain for any verse that encourages you to build your self-esteem or to love yourself more than you do. Sometimes advocates of this teaching will use as a proof text, “love your neighbor as yourself.” They argue that you must love yourself before you can properly love your neighbor and even before you can love God. But a glance at the context (Matt. 22:37-40) will show that there are two great commandments, not three, namely, to love God and to love our neighbor. Love for self is assumed as the minimal standard. If we would just love our neighbor as much as we do in fact love ourselves, we would fulfill the command.

False teachers often use Scripture, but they twist it by bringing in teaching from outside to pervert the true meaning of Scripture. Often, they are not up-front about their agenda. They cleverly work in a little error here and another error there, until they have taken people into a complete denial of the gospel. Paul warned that just as Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, even so his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:13-15). But they use subtlety and deception to gain followers.

3. **Beware of false teachers because their doctrine is destructive.**

Peter calls their teaching, “destructive heresies.” The word heresy originally was a neutral term that referred to a school of thought or a teaching. It can also refer to factions or divisions within the church (Gal. 5:20; 1 Cor. 11:18; Titus 3:10). But by adding the word “destructive,” Peter shows that he is talking about seriously wrong doctrine that destroys lives and churches and, if unchecked, leads to eternal judgment.

Peter takes us to the root of their destructive heresy when he adds (2:1), “even denying the Master who bought them.” Master is a strong word for Sovereign or Owner. We get our word “despot” from it, but in New Testament times it did not have the negative connotation that “despot” has in our language. It was used for the earthly master of slaves or to emphasize God’s absolute lordship.
Here (and in Jude 4) it refers to Jesus Christ. These false teachers were denying, both by their teaching and lifestyle, the lordship of Jesus Christ as the rightful owner of His people. If someone claims that you can believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and yet not submit to Him as Lord, it is destructive doctrine. It deceives people into thinking that they are saved because they “accepted Christ.” But Jesus said that He will say to such people, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23). They will be damned because their lives denied “the Master who bought them.”

But that phrase plunges us into a world of theological controversy! Some would argue that it supports the view that those who are saved can lose their salvation. But there are many Scriptures that affirm that God keeps all whom He saves (John 6:39; 10:27-29; Rom. 8:1, 29-39). Peter himself had denied the Master who bought him, yet the Lord did not cast him off.

Others use this phrase as proof that Christ died for all people, even for those who ultimately reject Him. The Master bought these heretics who end up in eternal condemnation. In other words, the verse seems to teach what is called “unlimited atonement.”

I thought about taking an entire message to deal with the extent of the atonement (many books have been written on this subject!), but instead I’m going to try to clarify things in a few paragraphs here. I used to think that Christ died to pay the penalty for all people, but that the benefits of His death only apply to those who trust in Him as Savior and Lord. In other words, Christ’s death made salvation possible for everyone, but actual only for those who believe. It’s like a gift that has been paid for and is being offered. But to be effective, the person must receive the gift. This is the most common view among evangelicals today.

But by reading the Puritan John Owen’s The Death of Death in the Death of Christ [Banner of Truth], I came to see that that is an inadequate view of the atonement. Owen points out (p. 61) that either Christ endured the wrath of God for “all the sins of all men, or all the sins of some men, or some sins of all men.” If He died for all the sins of all men, then all men will be saved, which is clearly against the teaching of the Bible. Some counter, “But Christ died for all sins except for unbelief. Men are lost because they do
not believe in Christ.” But, Owen counters (p. 62), is unbelief a sin or not? If not, why should sinners be punished for it? If it is somehow not atoned for by the blood of Christ, where does Scripture teach this? And, there are many Scriptures that say that people will be judged for many other sins (e.g., Rev. 20:12, 13; 21:8). Why would God judge them for these sins if they were all (except unbelief) atoned for?

If Christ died for some sins of all men (the sin of unbelief in Christ being excepted), then all men have some sin to atone for, and thus no one can be saved. This leaves as the only possible option that Christ died for all the sins of some men, namely, the elect. Christ came to save His people (the elect) from their sins (Matt. 1:21). He came to secure the eternal redemption of all that the Father had given to Him (John 6:39-40). His death actually paid their penalty. At the moment of salvation, the Holy Spirit quickens the elect sinner from spiritual death to spiritual life. He believes in Christ and Christ’s saving work is applied to his soul.

I do not have time to deal with the verses that seem to indicate that Christ died even for those who are eventually lost. (James Boice and Philip Ryken, The Doctrines of Grace [Crossway Books], pp. 126-134, give a brief treatment of this.) But let me try to explain why Peter says that these unbelieving heretics deny “the Master who bought them.”

Peter is making a comparison between the situation in Israel (v. 1, “false prophets arose among the people”) and that in the early church (“just as there will be false teachers among you”). In the context of warning Israel about false teachers, Moses describes God as (Deut. 13:5), “the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery...” Later, Moses rebuked the people, whom he calls (Deut. 32:5) “a perverse and crooked generation,” by asking rhetorically (Deut. 32:6), “Is not He your Father who has bought you?” In other words, the Old Testament refers to the exodus as God’s redeeming or buying His people (see also, 2 Sam. 7:23), even though only a remnant among them were truly saved. The redemption language was applied to the entire nation, even though not all were what we would call “born again.”
Peter applies this analogy to the church. Just as Israel as a nation were the redeemed people of God, although not all were saved, so the church is now God's redeemed nation (1 Pet. 2:9-10), and yet there are some among them who are not truly saved. They professed to be redeemed, but by their deeds they denied Him (Titus 1:16). So Peter here is not giving a theological treatment on the extent of the atonement. Rather, he uses the analogy of God's people being bought by the Master to show the heinous nature of the false teachers' sin. They associated with the chosen nation (the church). The Master bought the church, just as God bought or redeemed Israel through the Exodus. Yet these heretics did not obey Him. They denied the Master who bought them and the result for them and all that follow them will be swift destruction.

So, beware of false teachers because they are a perpetual threat to God's people; their methods are subtle and deceptive; and, their doctrine is destructive.

4. **Beware of false teachers because their influence is alluring.**

"Many will follow their sensuality..." (2:2). They had a large following. They were "successful!" It's amazing how the Christian world thinks that if a man has a huge following, he must be sound in the faith. If he builds a megachurch, the Christian world looks to him as a leader, without questioning what he teaches.

These false teachers invariably cater to the flesh. They do not preach against sin. They do not mention divine judgment or hell. They avoid truths like denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Christ no matter what the cost. Rather, they soothe people with uplifting thoughts about how much God loves you and wants you to have your best life now. If they ever mention the death of Christ, they say that He did it because He believed in your great worth. Now you need to believe in yourself and ask God to help you fulfill your dreams. People follow that kind of false teaching by the droves, because it feeds their pride.

5. **Beware of false teachers because their motives are impure.**

Peter shows that these men are driven by two related evil motives: sensuality and greed. At the root of both of these is their own
self-centeredness and pride. They want to exploit their followers to gratify themselves.

There is always a connection between false doctrine and impure living. Sometimes it’s difficult to figure out which came first, but invariably, they are intertwined. False doctrine leads to ungodly living, but the reverse is also true. If a man gets involved in sexual sin, the Bible convicts him. So he has to change the teaching somehow to dodge his guilty conscience.

Years ago, I had a roommate who came to Christ through the man who eventually founded the Children of God cult. They flourished during the hippie “free love” days. This man, who started out orthodox in the faith, fell into sexual sin. He encouraged all sorts of sexual sin among his followers. But, of course, he had to veer greatly from Scripture to do that. He got involved in demonism and all sorts of false teaching. Wrong behavior leads to wrong doctrine and wrong doctrine leads to wrong behavior.

6. **Beware of false teachers because their teaching and lifestyles result in dishonor to the way of the truth.**

Peter says (2:2), “because of them the way of the truth will be maligned.” The Christian faith is the way of the truth because Jesus Himself is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). But when professing Christians, and especially professing Christian leaders, do not live according to the truth of God’s Word, unbelievers mock and disregard the truth. The TV preachers who live lavishly while milking their audiences for more money and the well-known pastors who get exposed in sex scandals cause the world to scoff at the faith. Steer clear of them all!

7. **Beware of false teachers because they and all that follow them are heading toward eternal destruction.**

Peter uses the word “destruction” 5 of the 18 times that it appears in the New Testament. He speaks of (v. 1) “destructive heresies” and the “swift destruction,” which the false teachers will bring on themselves. He adds (v. 3), “their judgment from long ago is not idle and their destruction is not asleep.” He also uses the word in 3:7 in reference to “the day of judgment and the destruction of ungodly men” and again in 3:17, where he says that the false teachers twist the Scriptures “to their own destruction.” And, he uses
the verb in 3:6 to describe how God destroyed the world through the flood.

Contrary to what some teach, the destruction of the wicked does not refer to their annihilation. Rather, it refers to their eternal punishment in the lake of fire (Matt. 25:46; Rev. 17:8, 11; 20:14, 15; 21:8). The fact that these wicked men’s judgment is from long ago means that God declared judgment on false teachers in the Old Testament, centuries before. The phrase, “their destruction is not asleep” personifies destruction as an executioner, always ready to administer God’s sentence on those who teach and follow false doctrine. Again, Peter is not talking about minor doctrinal differences, but rather about false teachings that lead people to damnation. He does not seem to hold out any hope that these false teachers could be reclaimed for the truth. But he wrote to warn us, so that we would not be taken in by their destructive doctrines.

Conclusion

False teachers abound today. Years ago, I received an advertisement in the mail trying to entice me to buy a book, The Good Lord, in which the author, who went by the name of Paul Moses, claimed to have discovered the greatest thing since the church began. It was purportedly based solidly on the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The author claimed to have discovered that God is always good and thus he would never threaten anyone with everlasting torment in hell. He would never send plagues or catastrophes to wipe out thousands of people. He wants everyone to be rich and no one to be sick or hungry. He has a bright future for everyone in the world. All you had to do was buy his book to find out how you can change your view of God and get all the blessings!

I’ve never heard of that man since, but there are plenty just like him, promoting similar damnable errors, not just in the U.S. but also all around the globe. But their teachings are cruel because they lead people who follow them to eternal destruction. False teaching is not neutral. It is not just a minor deviation. It is evil to the core. Beware of false teachers!
Application Questions

1. How can we determine which doctrines are serious enough to qualify as “damnable”? What criteria apply?

2. How far should we go in preserving unity in the church? When is it necessary and right to divide?

3. So-called “non-lordship” salvation proponents argue that to require submission to Christ as Lord is to add works to faith as the basis for salvation. Why is their thinking seriously flawed?

4. Discuss: Everyone “limits” the atonement in some way. Either you limit its effectiveness by basing it on human will, or you limit its extent by applying it to the elect.