

How Should We Handle False Teachers?

Series: Living Godly In A Corrupt World!

by Ron R. Ritchie

Last year we were involved in a Bible study for people who had never before studied the Scriptures. Each week more and more newcomers joined in and began to study the Person of Jesus Christ as he is set forth in the gospel of Mark. So as to avoid any sense of uneasiness which people might have felt regarding what they were getting into, we decided to issue a statement about our intentions for the study. Here is what we came up with: "We are delighted you are here. You cannot join this group. We don't want your money. We'll probably never call you during the week. However, we will be here every Wednesday night until we complete our study in the gospel of Mark."

We felt we had to say that because today the voices of so many false prophets are clamoring for our attention. Some come knocking on your door. Some speak to you from your television screens or your radios. Some come offering everything from a new version of Scripture to a new vision for which they need your money. Just recently I heard a man claim that God had given to him and him alone the responsibility to inform all of unsaved humanity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Further, when he has completed this task, God will come, he said. But Scripture says that the body of Christ is made up of many believers, all of whom are called to share the good news with the world.

Scripture has much to say of the false prophets and the false teachers, what they look like and how they act. Today we will look at some of their characteristics in our studies in the second letter of Peter. We have come to the opening verses of the second chapter, where the apostle instructs first century Christians in Asia Minor on how to handle these false teachers. First, the apostle says,

1. Be Aware of God's Judgment

2 Peter 2:1-3:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be maligned and in their greed they will exploit you with false words, their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

Peter first points out that the problem was not a new one. Israel had faced false prophets in the past. They appeared during the time of Moses, who was moved to issue instructions on how to deal with them, as we read in Deuteronomy 3:1-5:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you.

Here Moses is saying, if a prophet comes among you and does signs and wonders (that's three out of three), and the signs and wonders come true (that's four out of four), and then says, "Let us follow after other gods," you should hear a warning signal go off in your head. That man who advocates that is a false prophet. While many of them come close, four out of five is just not good enough.

Warnings against false prophets were given by Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Zechariah in the Old Testament, and by Jesus in the New Testament. They will come, we are told, "in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves." In other words, they are hard to detect. They will come with foolish visions, dreams, misleading oracles and divinations. We need to understand the Scriptures so that we can identify them.

In the first chapter of this letter Peter gives a partial view of a true prophet. "No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation," he writes, "for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (verses 20, 21). He then refers to the false teachers presently among these believers, teachers who had distorted the truth already taught by God through his true prophets, through Jesus, the apostles and the pastor-teachers.

This problem had arisen early in the church, as we discover in the Book of Acts in the story of Peter's encounter with Simon the sorcerer. Later, Paul warned the Ephesian elders, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock . . . 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."

Like Moses, however, Paul gives us a yardstick by which we can measure false teachers. We find this in his second letter to the Corinthians. "For if anyone comes and preaches another Jesus [a Jesus who did not come in the flesh] . . . or you receive a different spirit which you have not received [a demonic spirit], or a different gospel [legalism instead of grace]"--beware of such false teachers, is the apostle's word.

But notice that some of these false teachers seem to use all the right terminology. If we are not really discerning it is easy to mistake them for the real thing. Remember that they come at times, in Paul's words, as "angels of light," their disciples as "servants of righteousness." Listen carefully to what I am going to read if you want proof of what I'm saying. Here is what one group is currently saying: "Jesus is Lord and Savior of all who believe in him . . . Jesus gave his life to avert God's judgment of humanity's sins . . . his substitutionary death and his resurrection from the dead demonstrates God's power and grace . . . flesh is flesh and God is spirit, so Jesus is not the divine man, he is simply a man. Jesus Christ was conceived by God's creating soul--life. That is taken from the writing of a group called "The Way." You can buy tapes of their version of the abundant life for a contribution of \$100.

This spiritual battle was going on before the foundation of the world. Lucifer, a created being, was cast out of heaven for wanting to be like God. He is free to roam this world, but he is limited to doing what God allows him to do. He is involved in a battle for the hearts and lives of men and women, a battle between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. But there is victory for all who place their faith in Christ. Jesus defeated Satan at the cross, and he defeated death in the resurrection. But until Christ returns in power and glory, Peter warns his generation and all generations to follow to beware of false teachers.

The apostle goes on to list four characteristics of these false teachers. First, he says, they will "secretly introduce destructive heresies." Note they operate in secret (not out in the open), they are destructive (they do not build up), and What they teach is heresy (not the truth).

Paul echoes these words of Peter in his letter to the Galatians. Warning against the legalism of the Judaizers, he writes, "It was because of false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in Order to bring us into bondage." Writing in the same vein, in 165 A.D. the Christian apologist Justin Martyr wrote these words to a Jew named Trypho: "And just as there were false prophets contemporaneous with your holy prophets, so now there are many false teachers among us, of whom our Lord forewarned us to be aware. Many have taught godless, blasphemous and unholy doctrine, forging them in his name, and have taught too, and are still teaching those things which proceed from the unclean spirit of the devil." False teachers operated in Moses' time, in Peter's time, in the second century, and they are still

spreading their false doctrines today.

Part of the "destructive heresies" of these false teachers, Peter says, is that they were "denying the Master who bought them." Scripture teaches that we were "dead in our trespasses and sins," that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," that "there is none righteous, no, not one." Man was in need of a Redeemer, thus Jesus came in the flesh, God incarnate, the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." He gave his life as "a ransom for many," so that those who place their faith in him as Lord and Savior are redeemed from the slave-market of sin and are set free to become his servants.

But these false teachers denied all of this, "denying the Master who bought them," according to Peter. Jude called them "ungodly persons who turn the grace of God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ." By their lifestyle they denied their claim to have been redeemed by Christ. As a result, Peter says, they brought "swift destruction on themselves"; "promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved." "What goes around comes around," as the saying goes. The very thing the false teachers sought to destroy people with will come back upon themselves.

The second characteristic of false teachers, according to Peter, is that they have a sensual lifestyle. They are preoccupied with gratifying their senses. They lack moral restraint, have no control over their sexual impulses. They care nothing for the judgment of God or man, but pervert the grace of God by justifying their sin. Does that sound familiar? Today sexual immorality is described as "a loving, caring relationship," pornography as "adult entertainment," homosexuality as "an alternative lifestyle." The problem with this lifestyle of the false teachers, Peter says, is that "many will follow their sensuality."

Thirdly, the apostle says, false teachers discredit the way of truth. Jesus taught that he was "the way, the truth and the life." To deny him as God come in the flesh and to deny his word is to depart from the truth. By so doing they bring discredit to the way of truth. A pastor new to our area was quoted recently in the newspaper as saying he was opposed to fundamentalists for putting Christianity in a bad light, and to anyone who believes the Bible should be taken literally. "I want to show people that there is another way of believing," he said. He does not believe homosexuality is evil in the sight of God, regardless of what Leviticus says. This is like saying, "I like the verse in the Bible that says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' end the verse, 'Blessed are the peacemakers,' but I don't like the one that says, 'Everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.' that verse that says, 'Turn the other cheek'? How could I run a business like that? But I Corinthians 13, I like that a lot." That is where this type of thing leads if we insist on picking and choosing which verses we will or will not obey.

The fourth characteristic which the apostle points out is that the false teachers are motivated by greed. Their hearts are trained to trade. They are never satisfied but want more and more of what the world has to offer—the lust of the flesh (power), the lust of the eyes (possessions), and the pride of life (position). According to Titus, these people "teach things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain." An embarrassing expose which was recently aired on the television program "60 Minutes" is instructive here. At a convention of Christian broadcasters one salesman was filmed describing fund-raising techniques. Here is part of what he said: "Our software can compose a letter that will read like your grandmother wrote it!" The reporter for the program asked, "Do you think Jesus would like this?" All for the sake of "sordid gain."

In verse 3 Peter lays out a spiritual principle with regard to false teachers that has applied in the past, applies in the present, and will apply in the future: "Their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep." How should we handle false teachers? The case has already been heard before the righteous Judge, Peter says. Speaking through Moses to a perverted generation of Israelites, God said, "Vengeance is mine and retribution. In due time their foot will slip for the day of their calamity is near. 'God long ago set the wheels of judgment in motion. "Their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep." They will come to utter ruin. They will lose all that makes existence worthwhile.

I am reminded that in the late 1960's Bishop Pike, a religious man, was creating quite a theological stir in this area over his unbiblical teachings and lifestyle. Following his death in Israel a few years later, his wife was interviewed. I will never forget what she said about her husband. It was so symbolic. Asked what had

happened to him, she replied, "He went to the desert to find the historical Jesus. He took a wrong turn, got lost, and died." "Their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep."

How should we handle false teachers? First, we should be aware of God's judgment, and secondly (2 Peter 2:4-11),

2. Be Aware of God's Protection

In this section Peter illustrates the spiritual principle that believers should be aware of God's protection by referring to three stories from the Old Testament. The latter two of these incidents illustrate these two principles: first, that God judges all ungodliness, and second, that God is able to rescue the righteous within a corrupt society.

The first incident is referred to in verse 4:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; . . .

We find the background to this reference in Genesis 6. Some angels who had been cast out of heaven at the time of Lucifer's rebellion left their spiritual domain and by incarnation or demonic possession came to earth as men. They then cohabited with the daughters of men and the offspring of these unions were born as giants, as distorted humanity. As a result of that act of rebellion against their Creator, these angels were banished to pits of gloom and darkness. (The Greek word for "hell" which Peter uses was a place of punishment in Greek mythology for the departed spirits of the extremely wicked, rebellious gods, etc.) According to Jude 6, they "did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, God has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day."

Here, then, is the first principle: If God did not spare the angels who rebelled against Him, what chance do false teachers have to avoid His judgment?

Peter takes his second example from the ancient world. Verse 5:

. . . [God] did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; . . .

Following the cohabitation of the fallen angels with the daughters of men, the earth was filled with violence and corruption so that the Lord was sorry he had created man. We take up the account again in Genesis 6:

Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. And the Lord said, "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land . . . (Gen.6:5-7a)

But God did not bring about his judgment immediately He waited patiently for 120 years while Noah preached righteousness and set about building the ark (I Peter 3) Then came the flood upon the world of the ungodly, upon those who had no time for God. Once he had announced the coming judgment, there was no stopping it.

Yet, right in the midst of that corrupt, distorted and ungodly world, God "preserved" Noah, Peter says. Of all the people of the world, why Noah? We read why in Genesis "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord . . . Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:8,9). Here is what Hebrews says of him: "By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Heb. 11:7).

This story of the salvation of Noah brings forth the second of our principles: If God did not spare the ancient world which was filled with the ungodly, what chance do the ungodly false teachers have to avoid judgment? Yet at the same time God is able to preserve the righteous.

Then Peter moves to his third illustration (verses 6-11):

... and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter; and if He rescued righteous Lot oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds), then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord.

Here the apostle illustrates his point by reaching into the Genesis account once again, this time picking up the story of Lot's rescue when God judged the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 13 we read that strife developed between the herdsmen of Abraham and his nephew Lot because their flocks were so great. The men agreed to part company, and Lot chose for himself the valley of the Jordan (on which were built the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah), while Abraham settled in the land of Canaan

Genesis 18 then records the visit of the three angels to Abraham, and their promise that Sarah would give birth to a son. In chapter 19 we read that two of these angels subsequently went on to Sodom to perform the judgment which the Lord had told Abraham he was about to carry out on the cities, "for their sin is exceedingly grave" (Gen. 18:20). Although they wanted to spend the night in the town square, Lot prevailed upon them to spend the night in his house.

Later that evening the men of Sodom, young and old alike, surrounded the house and demanded that Lot produce his visitors so that they might have sexual relations with them. Lot pleaded with the men to go away, even going so far as to offer his two daughters to them to gratify them, but to no avail. The angels then pulled Lot back into the house and struck with blindness the men who were seeking them. They told Lot they had been sent to destroy the cities, yet the following morning because of his hesitation they had to drag him, his wife and both of his daughters to safety. "Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground" (Gen. 19:24,25). In the midst of this fiery judgment, nevertheless, God was willing to rescue Lot and his family.

In the Genesis account Lot seems to be projected as a worldly, selfish, weak and morally depraved man, yet here in Peter's letter he is referred to as "righteous Lot [who was] oppressed [beaten down to his knees] by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard . . . felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds." This was no "adult entertainment." Lot had seen it all--prostitution, homosexuality, child sacrifice, Baal worship--every form of perversion. But he could not deliver himself from this corruption. However, we read in the Genesis account that "the compassion of the Lord was upon him; and they brought him out, and put him outside the city" (Gen. 19:16b)

Thus we come to our third principle: If God did not spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were filled with gross immorality, and He is keeping the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, what chance do the present ungodly teachers have to avoid the judgment which "from long ago is not idle"? Yet at the same time the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation.

But there is an even greater principle here in these verses. Peter has not only used these three illustrations as a warning to the false teachers, he gives the second and third illustrations as a light of hope to faithful Christians living in a dark and corrupt world.

Noah and Lot both lived in corrupt, ungodly societies. Both were forced to remain in the midst of temptation for a period, Noah for 120 years, while Lot lived (the word means "he made permanent residence") in Sodom. At no time were they removed from their respective locations. Only when God had begun judging their societies were either of these men removed to safety. In the same way, the Christians in Asia Minor had to live in a corrupt society, being tempted to unfaithfulness, to follow false teachers and to believe the mockers who denied Christ's second coming. However Peter says, God would deliver them from the midst of temptation and personally return in power and glory to deliver them from ungodliness once and for all.

That is the promise of I Corinthians 10:13:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.

Note that Paul is not talking about a way out, an exit. Look carefully at the last phrase in that verse: "that you may be able to endure it." You're not going anywhere! God will deliver you out of it, not away from it! Right in the midst of your circumstances God is providing a way for you to endure it; he is preserving you. When he comes in glory and power at his second coming he will rescue you out of it.

In verses 10 and 11, Peter infers that the false teachers are just like the men of Sodom and Gomorrah. They had, the same characteristics: they "indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties . . ." Yet, Peter continues, ". . . angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord." But let us not forget what the apostle said about them in verse 3, ". . . their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep."

How should we handle false teachers who go about in our society today seeking converts to their cause? First, we should be aware of God's judgment. He knows who they are, and he will deal with them. We learn from the parable of the tares and the wheat in Matthew 13 that it is not our task to weed the tares out of the wheat field. Jesus said, "The harvest is at the end of the age, and the reapers are angels." Our task is to be aware that "their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep." The eternal dead of Noah's day are consciously awaiting final judgment. The eternal dead of Abraham's day are consciously awaiting final judgment. The living dead of Peter's day and our day are suffering punishment and awaiting judgment.

Secondly, we should be aware of God's protection over his own. We can walk among the publicans, the sinners and wine-bibbers and not partake of their sin. God wants us to move out into our communities because there are no other kinds of people--and we are the ones who have the good news. Don't be afraid of people. Love them, reach out to them, care for them, knowing that as we go in his name he will call out from among them a people for his name's sake.

God will protect you! Share the good news with our starving, corrupt society. We need Mother Teresas here on this Peninsula. She is working among those who are dying. We can minister among those who are both physically and spiritually dying. For example, people who are suffering from AIDS need to be fed and washed and taken to hospitals. They need people to sit with them until they die. But this needs to be done without condemnation, without any display of self-righteousness. At the first service this morning I saw an unwed mother with her baby sitting between a couple who had brought them to church. We need to do more of that and spend less of our lives identifying the false prophets. Let us focus on being Christlike in a corrupt society.

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