

2nd PETER BIBLE STUDY

2 Peter 2:03 (a)

Lesson #5

Introduction

This is the third lesson in our series on false teachers. We will be examining verse 3 from chapter 2 of second Peter. This chapter has 22 verses, and all of them are regarding the subject of false teachers who arise from within the churches. Chapter 2 comprises the main body of this, Peter's second and final epistle, and this section on false teachers is without a doubt the primary emphasis and intention that Peter had, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, when he composed this letter. I'm reasonably sure that we all have at least some idea of the danger, and of the harm that can be done within the churches by those who teach false doctrines. But what I've discovered during my preparation time for these lessons isn't that there are a great many false teachers, I've been aware of that for quite some time, but what might be an even greater problem is that there seems to be no uniformity or consistency of understanding amongst the multitude of critics as to what actually constitutes a "false teacher" as defined by Scriptures.

There seems to be no uniformity in our understanding of what a "false teacher" actually is, or how we identify them as such, and what we do in response. As I studied the writings and critiques that are available on the Internet, it became apparent that there are at least as many false critics as there are false teachers. And I suppose this is understandable, in as much as many false teachers are also themselves false critics, because they often base their ministries on the denial of the Orthodox beliefs of traditional Christianity. The very first church I was a member of was led by a preacher whose theology was as errant as any I've ever come to know, but yet the major thrust of his ministry was on the critique of Orthodox Christianity. Now in his defense, very much of his criticisms were accurate. But since he didn't have the right answers either, he made an entire ministry based on his own bizarre personal interpretations coupled with vigorous criticism of the mistakes of others. He was talented at exposing error, but he had no truth to offer in its place.

When the Bible speaks of "false teachers", or false prophets, what exactly does it mean by that term? And, is there a difference between a "false teacher," and a teacher who is simply mistaken on a particular issue? Does holding a single false interpretation constitute one as a "false teacher" as defined by biblical definition? Well, if it does, I believe it would be safe to say that with the singular exception of Jesus Christ, there has never been anything on this earth but false teachers. Just yesterday, as I was reading criticisms posted on the Internet, I came across one where the writer listed, by name, virtually every respected theologian of the past, and present, and promptly declared every one of them "false teachers" and even heretics, based on something that he had found somewhere within the volumes of their writings. Many of which I recognized and knew firsthand to be taken out of context, but on some, I agree that these men held positions with which I do not necessarily agree. So, does this make them, by biblical definition "false teachers" and therefore, as this critic claims, heretics?

If we accomplish nothing else in this study of chapter 2, it is my sincerest hope, that at the very least, we gain an understanding of how to make a determination, from the biblical point of view, of what constitutes a "false teacher" or a false prophet. Using only the Bible as our dictionary of terms, and the verses that we are examining in this lesson, let's see if there is a difference between a "false teacher," as warned about in the Scriptures, and any other teacher who may, in fact, be teaching something that's not correct, "false."

False Teachers Within the Churches (3)

Greed, Exploitation, and False Words

20 But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. 2 Peter 1:20-21 (NASB)

1 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. 2 Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; 3 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.

2 Peter 2:1-3 (NASB)

Even though we've already done complete lessons on the first two verses, I still want to just refresh our memories on these two verses before we move into verse three. Peter makes it emphatically clear that there will be teachers among the churches who are **more** than just mistaken, or unclear on certain points of biblical doctrine. In doing so, he goes on to describe them from two perspectives:

First, he speaks of the nature of the teachings, as those which are destructive heresies. Not every mistake or error can be labeled a destructive heresy. Yes, every error has repercussions, and all error needs to be identified and corrected, but there clearly are degrees of error and the threat that they pose. Romans 14 speaks of the mature Christians making accommodations for the young ones who don't yet understand the freedom that we enjoy in Christ, by voluntarily suspending certain of those freedoms because exercising them could harm the faith of the young believers. So, truth is intended to be used to liberate the believers from their bondage to ignorance and sin, it's not a hammer to beat the saints into subjection, nor even worse, a means to lure young believers into sin.

Secondly, he speaks of false teachers in regards to their own heart attitude and motivations. He does not call these false teachers simply good saints who are mistaken, he is going to describe them in later verses as anything but that. The one's Peter is describing are not Christians, they are deceivers, false professors of Christ, who know what they're doing and are proud of themselves for it. They are trained in the arts of deception and exploitation, and they ply their arts with the expertise of masters. When the scriptures speak of false teachers this is what it means.

Verse 3(a):

3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words;

Any misrepresentation of the holy scriptures, whether small or great, is an affront to the Lord and damaging to the saints. But still, does this absolutely render that person, by biblical definition, a "false teacher?" Is it that simple, does being wrong on an issue, even an important one, automatically and irrevocably earn one the title of "false teacher?" Or, can there be a false teaching without there necessarily being a false teacher that's doing it? Is there a meaningful distinction between a false teaching and a false teacher? Or is this just semantics?

Let's consider the situation with a well known first century preacher who was almost considered to be of apostolic caliber by many. In Acts 18, we're told of a man named Apollos, who was boldly preaching about Jesus, but only from a knowledge of the ministry of John the Baptist. When a young couple named Priscilla and Aquila, who were well known for their evangelistic works, heard him speak, they took him aside and explained the things of Christ more accurately, and as a result, Apollos became one of the leading teachers of the first century church. He had been teaching about Christ, but wasn't entirely accurate in all that he was teaching, but when instructed in the truth, he accepted it gladly and made the appropriate corrections. There's no hint that he was ever considered a false teacher. Why, because he was preaching from an exuberance of spirit to the glory of Jesus Christ, not for his own personal benefit.

He wasn't trying to build a following for himself, he was trying to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God, and his intentions were only honorable, even when his message was not entirely accurate. Does this mean that accuracy isn't important as long as you have good intentions? Of course not, and that's why Priscilla and Aquila **immediately** took him aside and corrected his misunderstandings. The scriptures say that Apollos was mighty in the Old Testament scriptures, and eloquent in his speaking ability, but yet, when confronted by this couple of no recognizable importance, he nevertheless accepted their instruction without objection. What does this say about the motives and character of this man? It's no wonder that he went on to become a major force on behalf of the gospel, and has his name often recorded in the holy scriptures. His desire was for the truth, not for the profit, not for the wealth, not for the personal gains he might derive.

And this is also what this verse in second Peter is telling us. That the biblical definition of a "false teacher" includes within it, the motives of the heart of the one doing the false teaching. Oh yes, there is still truth and there is still error, and anything that's error is false teaching, but the scriptures reserve the title of "false teacher" for one who does so for wrong reasons and motives. There is exploitation behind it says Peter. And exploitation isn't accidental or harmless, it's intentional deception of people, to their detriment, for the selfish personal gains of the one doing the exploiting.

Now, do not for one second think that this means that we are to simply tolerate error as long as we think the preacher has good intentions, that's not what Priscilla and Aquila did, they immediately met with Apollos and confronted his errors, and made the necessary corrections. And it is precisely this, that he did, humbly and gladly make the corrections, that distinguishes him from a biblical false teacher. No false teacher will correct their errors as long as they realize that what they're doing is working for them. They will shun and scoff at criticism, even when offered in a humble spirit, by well meaning critics, because they usually already know what they're doing, and precisely why they're doing it. Therefore, so that we're absolutely clear, the scriptures tie the motives of the teacher, together with their false words, to form the biblical definition of that term "false teacher." And, these are the one's who are inside the churches, or at least trying to work from within what is recognized as accepted orthodox Christianity. It's not talking about the preachers of the various non-Christian, and neo-Christian religious groups, of course they're false, but they're not inside our churches.

Now all those who know my teachings will already know that I'm the last one in the world to condone error and falsehood, either intentionally or unintentionally, but the terms "false teacher" and "heretic" are being thrown around today, especially on the internet, by self-declared critics, who are quite often much closer to meeting the definitions of those terms themselves, than the ones whom they're accusing.

For us to apply the biblical label of false teacher, with all the ramifications that term embraces, we must be quite certain that we're correct in its application. It's one thing to boldly declare that a teaching that someone is promoting is false, there's so much incorrect interpretation, which, by definition is "false" that one who teaches the scriptures regularly can't avoid using that word. But its another thing entirely to declare that teacher as being an intentional exploiter of the holy scriptures and the body of Christ, for their own personal selfish gains. Make no mistake, there are plenty of these to go around, and finding them isn't difficult, but we would do well to understand the true nature and significance of that allegation before we just arbitrarily apply it to anyone. When its warranted, we must not hesitate, but where we don't have sufficient evidence, we are in danger of slandering a brother who is simply unlearned and in need of further education.

In our earlier lesson I used an example of separating genuine diamonds from fakes that had been intentionally mixed together, and I pointed out that in the process of doing this, it was just as important not to throw away a single good one, as it was to reject the all fake ones, and this is exactly what I was talking about. We tend to get very emotionally attached to many of our theological perspectives, and when any of them are contested we're prone to overreact against the one who has a differing interpretation. Certainly truth matters, Paul openly confronted Peter (Gal 2:11-14) over an issue concerning the truth of the gospel, when Peter's actions were inconsistent with his own teachings, but Paul never called Peter a false teacher, even when what Peter was doing was false. And again, just like the situation with Apollos, Peter accepted the correction with humility because Paul was right in his critique. And both only wanted the truth to prevail to the glory of Jesus Christ.

In these examples we see the perfect situation. The one in error rightly accepted the criticism and made the appropriate correction. But there are other situations where it isn't nearly so easy to determine who is actually right. Romans chapter 14, and to some degree Colossians chapter 2, deal with several of these situations on which even genuine Christian may have differing points of view. We discussed this at length in our lesson last week. Is it okay to baptize babies if you don't ascribe regeneration to the action. I won't convince anybody to change there beliefs on this issue, so let's get the point. Does our difference of beliefs on this issue constitute one of the groups as false teachers and even heretics? I'm sure some have applied those terms to their opposition at some point, but the truth is that neither the gravity of the issue, not the intent of the hearts of either party, puts differences like this, and so many others, into such a category. This doesn't mean that we can't have strong beliefs on these issues, in fact we should be fully persuaded in our own hearts as to the intentions and applicability of all our practices and worship. Paul told the Romans:

5 One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

Romans 14:5 (NASB)

22 The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.

Romans 14:22 (NASB)

Contrary to our natural inclinations, the God of creation has afforded His creatures the freedom to pursue truth at their own pace and according to their own perceived priority. He has not made every tiny intricate detail of life into a matter of singular absolutes. He has made, by His own free will, room within His creation for humans to make their own determinations as to that which they perceive to best honor God, so long as they are all done within the clear boundaries of Godliness, as set forth in His divine scriptures. It would appear that although He wants all His children to be made into the likeness of His Son, that means regarding His righteousness, and obedience, and affections, but not necessarily His favorite foods, or favorite clothes, or favorite colors, or favorite hymns, do you see what we're saying?

Therefore, accepting that there is an allowance for some differences of opinions within the body of Christ, on a multitude of issues, some that seem trivial, and even some that seem very important, that doesn't render every teacher who doesn't get every answer exactly right, by definition a "false teacher" who is exploiting the body of Christ for selfish gains. By in large the vast majority of theological disputes between Christians isn't because of the intentional exploitation of one of the parties in the dispute, but over the inability of the human mind to absolutely and accurately comprehend the things of God, coupled with the intentional design of the human psyche to have minor differences of perspectives.

We must not confuse these differences with what the bible identifies as "false teachers" who have risen up within our churches to intentionally exploit the members for their own sordid gains and pleasures. The second half of Peter's sentence goes on to make this point crystal clear, and rightly define the nature of these "false teachers" about whom he's warning us. He is not talking about genuine Christians who have differences of interpretations and practices, he's talking about unregenerate imposters, who claim the name of Christ, but by their deeds they deny Him.

Verse 3(b):

their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

Now I'm not quite ready to go into this part of the verse just yet, but I've quoted it to demonstrate that Peter is speaking about people who are destined from long ago for judgement and destruction. This is not the kind of words that could be used for true Christians who simply have differing interpretations of scripture. These are sons and daughters of perdition, who are allowed, for a brief period of time, to infest and affect our churches by the divine decree of God. And as strange and impossible as it seems, just like the crucifixion of Jesus seemed impossible, they are doing their intended part in the working out of God's overall creation plan. And while they appear to prosper in their exploitation, nevertheless their Creator is not asleep, and when they've done their intended work, their final end will be judgement and destruction.

The tools these false teachers use is false words. False words that convey false ideas, particularly ones that play to our human weaknesses of the flesh, and carnal desires. If we're told that we can have our cake and eat it too, and don't recognize the folly of this teaching, then we're susceptible to these teachers. If we're told that we can have our best life right here and now, and then go to heaven for eternal bliss when it's over, then why would we resist? If we're told that God wants us to be the most prosperous people on earth, and live the most happy and fulfilled and trouble free lives of all the inhabitants of the earth, then why would we reject this teaching? If we're told that we really should try to behave ourselves, but if we can't, then that's really okay, because Jesus died so that we wouldn't need to feel guilty anymore when we continue to commit sins. Why would we want to resist these great benefits?

Why, because Jesus never said any such things as these; again, Jesus never said any such things as these, and neither did any of His Apostles after Him. You can turn on your television and find at least a half dozen self proclaimed bible teachers who are presenting these kinds of teachings, in various combinations, at any hour of the day or night. They're easy enough to recognize, so true Christians shouldn't be deceived by them. Just as Peter tells us, they are obviously in the business of exploitation. They will be in you pocket up to their armpits before their sermon is over, every time. If they aren't promising you wealth, then they're promising health. If they're not promising self esteem and happiness, then they're promising a new spiritual breakthrough to a higher level that you've never attained before, or deliverance from those nasty demonic spirits in your life. But it will never be free of charge, it seems that Jesus always needs liberal amounts of cash, to release Him to work all those miracles that He just can't wait to begin, if you'll just sow a generous seed of faith into that preacher's ministry first. That's all Jesus needs, your releasing Him to go to work on your behalf, for a generous seed of faith.

This isn't the only pitch, but it's the most popular because it produces the most cash, but there's others as well. There's some who simply want the recognition and respect that goes with the title of pastor or teacher to feed their ego's, as Jesus told the Pharisees. They're not happy unless they have the microphone and the attention of the audience, and they'll teach whatever it takes to keep your attention and respect. They've often got some bizarre teachings that you won't hear anywhere else, so if they can get you hooked on these then they've got you. Some are just marginally sane, if not actually insane, teaching people to commit mass suicide, and separate themselves completely from all other fellowships. This is a very dangerous sign, when you're taught that your group is the only one with the truth, and all others are apostate, and any associations with outside books, or teachings, or ministries is discouraged or forbidden. This was the case with the first church that I was associated with, and it's through means such as this that their ignorance of the truth can be protected and exploitation perpetuated indefinitely.

So, what Peter is saying, is that these one's about whom he's speaking are false converts, false Christians, who have infiltrated the church by way of a false profession of Christ. They don't openly oppose Christ, instead they use His name as a means to gain acceptance into the church, and secure positions of leadership. They're often among the first one's to volunteer to help out and serve the church's physical needs, and when they do they make sure that everyone knows about it.

Now please don't take this to mean that only the false ones offer to do this, the gift of helps are a legitimate gift of some of those who are in the churches, and we're all very grateful for them. What you'll notice about the legitimate one's is that they make no effort to get recognition and public praises, but rather quietly and faithfully do their works with a quiet and gentle spirit, and no one but the Lord Himself knows the half of the kind and wonderful and helpful things they do within their churches.

Not so with the false teachers. They need the recognition and respect, and they covet the authority and attention, and any perceived competition for these will be quickly eliminated. Churches with false teachers are rarely headed up by a multiplicity of elders, with the exception of husband and wife teams that are popular in charismatic circles, because the leader needs autonomy to carry out their agenda. They're not going to want to share the wealth with a competitor within their own ministry. But, they do quite often endorse and support other false teachers who are working the same market, because they think they validate their own ministries when they openly approve of each other.

Now I think we've said enough to on this subject to make it clear beyond any reasonable doubt just what the biblical definition of a false teacher includes, so that we don't misapply that term through our ignorance of what we're implying when we use it. So now, I'd like to try to tie this all together, and put it into perspective in my conclusion statements.

Conclusion:

First, we have established that there is without a doubt a genuine distinction between a false teaching and a false teacher. Our examples of Apollos and of Peter when confronted by Paul, show us definite examples from the scriptures of where very well respected Christian brothers were at least briefly, teaching things that were false. But yet, neither of these men are in any way accused of being false teachers because of their false teachings. Now I was tempted to use the word "incorrect" in place of "false" to soften the impact, but I realized that this is using semantics to skirt the issue, and I don't want to do that. If I'm teaching something that is "incorrect" then I'm teaching something that's "false" this is simply an inescapable fact. But the scriptures provide examples for us to show that it recognizes the difference between honest mistake and deliberate intent. Every person that the scriptures label as a "false teacher" is guilty of both, false teachings, and intentional exploitation of others by those teachings, to accommodate their own greed. (v.3a) So, the next time I call someone a "false teacher" I will make certain that I understand the full scope of the charges that I'm leveling against that person, and I hope you will do the same thing. Words have meaning, and we need to know that when we use them.

But having said that, we don't want to be deterred from our scriptural duty to use this label where it rightly applies, because these crafty exploiters are prolific within the churches right now in this very day, and we're warned to be aware of their presence, and told to identify them for what they are, so that they cannot so easily damage the true Christians that get caught up in their deceptions. We're not told to just ignore them and let them freely wreak whatever damage they can within our churches, because the Lord will deal with them when He returns.

Oh yes, the Lord will deal with them regarding their final judgement, but we're exhorted by Jesus, and Peter, and Paul, and John, and Jude to identify and expose them right here and right now. In fact that's most likely why they're allowed to be here in the first place, so that the saints may learn to recognize and appreciate the truth, and be taught to treasure and desire it enough to earnestly contend for it. If the gospel truly has any value to us, then we'll readily take the effort, and suffer the consequences of earnestly defending it from corruption.

We need to understand that these false teachers and exploiters aren't in our churches against God's will, they have no such power, they're here because God has allowed it to be so, and although they mean it for their own evil purposes, nevertheless God means it for the ultimate good of His beloved elect, just like the crucifixion of His beloved Son. But don't take that as meaning we're supposed to resign ourselves to it, and just passively accept it, because God is permitting it, but rather as a test of our hearts and our affections, because what we value we will be willing to defend. And it's the truth that's presented in the gospel that's our sole and only hope of eternity; so, are we willing, even anxious, to diligently defend that truth by opposing these false teachers who are defiling for profit, that which we believe to be holy and sacred?

It's altogether reasonable to consider the possibility that God has allowed these false teachers to invade our churches to test our hearts, and to show us the degree of our own sincerity. Shall we passively allow them to defile for profit, that which we hold sacred, without even a word of opposition? If so, what does that say to God about us? Would you stand passively in your front yard as you watched your neighbor assaulting or cursing at your child? And if you did, what would your child reasonably conclude about the sincerity of your love for him?

Now if you're a young Christian, or maybe even if not, you may get confused as to how we Christians are supposed to respond to various issues. On the one hand we have Jesus passively submitting to His arrest and crucifixion. And we have the myriads of saints who are martyred for their faith. This is because we have the word of God telling us that this is His intended will. Jesus knew from His earliest childhood that He was destined for crucifixion by the will of His Father. So when the time came He passively submitted. But we also remember that when He came into Jerusalem and entered the Temple, and found merchants who had setup in the Temple, He was so infuriated at seeing His Father's House turned into a den of thieving merchants, that He took some tree branches and quite literally smacked them out of there with those branches. He was under no restraints of scripture to passively tolerate the defiling of that which was holy and sacred. And His affection for His Father, and for His Father's House, invoked a most appropriate response that we can all understand very well. There are times to remain silent, and there are times to speak out, and knowing the difference is vital.

And such is the case with false teachers. We are not told to passively ignore them, or to tolerate them, but to expose them and oppose them. However, we are not allowed to physically harm them, because that exceeds the scope of our human authority. Their physical judgement is reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ. So I hope that we understand that we have both the scriptural freedom, and even the obligation, to openly oppose these false teachers, and to expose them for what they are, for the protection of the saints, and for our passion for protecting the truths that we hold sacred.

Now I don't want to end this lesson until I deal with the seemingly unavoidable situations where we find ourselves in vigorous opposition to some particular teaching, or teachings of certain others, but we don't find any evidence that they are malicious or devious. We just strongly disagree, like Paul and Barnabas over the issue of John Mark's accompanying them on a return missionary journey. (Acts 15) This disagreement was so strong that it made Paul and Barnabas part company for a very good while.

Both of these men are considered pillars of the faith, both are often referred to as apostles, though not of equal caliber perhaps, but still they could disagree so sharply that a separation of company was unavoidable. There's no record that either had any ill will toward the other, and there's no record of any charges of apostasy on the part of either, just a very strong difference of opinion on which neither party felt they could yield, to the degree that it required a separation. If this could happen to Paul and Barnabas, then we're fooling ourselves if we think that it's never going to happen to any of us. We wish these things never happened, but they do.

There are going to be issues that we feel are just too important to compromise on, and these issues will cause us to separate into various like minded groups, just as it did with Paul and Barnabas. But as sad as this is, it's the way life works, even Christian life, and the scriptures were wise enough to give us an advance example. It wasn't necessary to forever determine which of these two positions was right and which was wrong, it's not even certain that there is a clear right and wrong there, but I'll go on record as being sympathetic with Barnabas on this one. After all, it was Barnabas' compassion that caused him to associate with Paul after his conversion when everybody else was still afraid of him.

But the point is, that we will have to live with some serious disagreements, and they will cause us to separate into like minded groups, but just like our examples, our goal and our mission remains identical. And our commitment to the God honoring, and soul saving truths of the gospel remains untainted, irregardless of these differences. These things do not make our Christian brothers "false teachers," even if it makes what they believe and practice wrong in our own opinion.

Of course this entire statement that I've just made must be understood to be over issues that are not among those that are clearly understood to comprise the very essentials of the faith. On these, there can never be any compromises. Any teacher that teaches anything that compromises the essential truths of the gospel, especially concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ, must be considered to be outside, that is, not a part of, of genuine orthodox Christianity.

Now we've covered a lot of ground in this lesson, and we've taken a good look at the situation of false teachers, and false teachings, and differences of interpretations, and how to distinguish between them, and what to do about them. The scriptures give us the necessary information to deal with these issues, and make these determinations, but we must become informed enough on those scriptures to be able to rightly and effectively implement that instruction. We haven't taught anything new or revelational in this lesson, we've just carefully reviewed and examined the scriptures to see what they want us to know. So, for those who always want the short and quick version, here's a recap on false teachers:

First, we must understand what the bible means when it speaks about false teachers, and use only that as our definition of this term. This warning is about people, specifically teachers, who are within the churches, not the ones in false pagan religions, who are, with full intent and purpose, using false teachings to exploit the saints. There are many degrees, and many motives, even simple non malicious ignorance, that produce false teachings, but Peter is talking specifically about intentional deceivers in this particular set of verses.

Secondly, when one is identified as a false teacher, by biblical definition, we are instructed to openly oppose their false teachings, by the proper application of the truth, and expose them as well for their own greed and exploitation. We do this for the protection of the saints, and for our own passion for the truth of the gospel, and our love for our Savior.

Third, not every disagreement between teachers and teachings involves false teachers and exploitation. We must be able to rightly make these determinations and apply the proper responses, based on the teachings and instructions of holy scriptures. We have learned everything that we need from the scriptures to be able to do this consistently, if it's our desire to do so. Next week we'll continue in this chapter, which continues to provide us with the necessary knowledge to rightly identify those false teachers, who are working their mischief right in our midst and under our very noses.

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11/16/10