WATCH OUT FOR FALSE TEACHERS

December 31, 2016

2 Peter 2:1-22

Key Verse 2 Peter 2:1 "But there were also false prophets among the people, even as 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."

When I was preparing this message, I browsed through many webpages for more clarification on some concepts in 2 Peter 2. One significant thing I’ve found out is the danger of Christians especially new believers to get lost in the middle of Christian ideological battles. There are a couple of obvious prosperity preachers whom I understood as false teachers. Nonetheless, at one point I was distracted when I encountered articles claiming some respectful pastors like Timothy Keller and Charles Stanley as false teachers. The critic claims that Timothy Keller promotes the idea of gospel designed to be attractive to unregenerate man, but stripped of the Divine power and authority. When I read their explanation filled with theological jargons, I was confused at first and felt vulnerable since I personally gained spiritual knowledge from their teachings. At that moment I’ve realized how privileged I am to have regular bible study with students and ministry members. In time of confusion, the words of God gave me conviction of the truth delivered by the two pastors. My confidence in their teachings in alliance with the words of God set me free from the fear of uncertainty and doubts. That was exactly what believers would feel when they encounter false teachers and their twisted idea of Christianity to bring people to confusion. Having me experienced this kind of confusion, I have personally learnt how important believers are to be rooted in God’s words and be filled with the knowledge of God for discernments. From Peter’s letters, we can find his genuine heart for believers’ steadfast faith in God’s promises and his urgent warning to watch out for false teachers. The way he helps us in chapter 1 is by reminding us about God's precious and very great promises. He assures us that if we trust firmly in these, God's power will flow into us and enable us to “escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (4), and to grow in godliness, self-control and love. However, in chapter 2 we can see a very significant change in Peter's approach with the same goal. His goal is still to make us firm and stable and unshakable in our faith. But his approach is very different. Chapter 2 is mainly a warning against the destruction that will befall on those who don't avail themselves of God’s divine power and the danger of false teachers. Peter felt that believers needed to know about false teachers so that they would be cautious and alert. The main point of the chapter is the disclosure of the dark side of false teachers, revealing their motives, characteristics, a warning that destruction awaits the false teachers and their followers and God's ability to rescue the godly from their trials.

**Part 1. Who are false teachers?**

Many texts in the Old Testament warn Israel about the danger of false prophets. False prophets spoke out of their own minds, imaginations and dreams as though it was the word of the Lord. Their motive was to lead people astray from the one true God. They promised peace when God was ready to judge the nation, planting a false sense of security and hindering true repentance. In the same way, false teachers are a serious danger to the Christian church, and many warnings are given about them in the New Testament. False teachers do not wear t-shirts declaring, “I am a false teacher.” They are sneaky. They secretly introduce teachings which contradict sound doctrine. To recognize them requires discernment. So Peter exposes their characteristics, motives and behavior.

*The first and foremost characteristic is that they deny that Jesus is the sovereign Lord.*

Verse 1b says, “They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them….” What are heresies? It is anything that denies the teaching of Jesus and denying the doctrines God has given, and dividing the body He has created. It is to deny that Jesus is God. We Christians believe that Jesus is God with authority as the Creator, Redeemer and Judge. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus purchased us. He deserves our worship and obedience. We are not our own; we belong to Jesus. But these false teachers do not want Jesus telling them what to do. They want to do what they want to do. They also tell other people what they want to hear, not the truth that they need to hear. They say, “It is okay. There is no judgment; God loves you—you don’t need to repent.” In contrast, as God’s servants, our aim is to exalt Christ and lead people to Christ, recognizing Christ’s divine authority as God. We should lead people to Christ, not to ourselves. In order to do so, we should teach the full gospel message, not avoiding sin, repentance, judgment and hell. We should teach the truth, seeking God’s approval not man’s.

*A second characteristic of false teachers is extreme immorality (2,12-14a).*

Look at verse 2. “Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.” The “Shameful way” is the way of sensuality immorality mostly sexual sins that fall outside of what God originally intended for sex to be and to represent. And these false teachers will gather around them many false followers who have no problem following “shameful ways” whatever ways these may be. In verse 12b. They act like animals, following neither reason nor truth but instinct, ignoring even the most basic of human values. They teach about freedom in the flesh or in sexual behavior or even as far as to shamefully disgrace, dishonor, discredit the word of truth in the Bible. Some are deceived because it is what they want to hear and someone just justified their desire with a word or two from the Bible. Living in this fallen world, our godly lifestyle and moral integrity are to honor God and give credibility to Christian faith. In Corinthians 6:20 Paul says, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.” The false teachers were taking the grace of God and perverting it into licentiousness (Jude 1:4) (license to sin). They were saying that what we do with our bodies does not matter, and in fact the more sensuality you pursue, the more you show your true Christian freedom from the law.

*A third characteristic is that they are greedy (3a,14b-16).*

Verse 3a says, “In their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories.” In the Greek, the word “fabricated stories” is translated as plastic words. Plastic words are a beautiful imitation of truth, but they are not truth. Peter tells us that the false teachers will speak plastic words made up teachings which sound outstanding, inspirational and well versed. Instead of preaching the gospel truth, they preach the prosperity gospel. A prosperity theology is a religious belief among some Christians, who hold that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth. They use a few words from the Bible to prove their sincerity and most of the time God’s words are used out of context to make their sermon more exciting. The gospel is not there. Whoever heard it is inspired by splendor of the sermon, but there seem to have been no conviction of sin which leads people to repentance and to faith and to life in Christ Jesus. In other words false teachers are doing this in greed and mostly for money. Peter introduces the prophet Balaam as an example. Balak, the king of Moab, was alarmed at the irresistible advance of the Israelites. In order to solve this problem, Balak, king of Moab, promised to give a huge amount of money to Balaam if he would pronounce a curse against the Israelites. Balaam refused his offer outwardly. But in his heart he really wanted to get the money. So Balaam was going to Moab, where the enemy wanted him to come. On the way to Moab he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey who spoke with a man’s voice and restrained the prophet’s madness. It happened because the donkey saw that the angel of the Lord was blocking the way with a drawn sword (16; Nu 22:23). Balaam was a servant of God outwardly. But inwardly he was a greedy man. Since he was known as a servant of God, many people followed him, believing that he would lead them to the way of God. But Balaam caused all those who followed him to stumble because of his hypocrisy and greed.

*A fourth characteristic is that they are not trustworthy (17-22).*

In verses 17 Peter tells us something very important. “These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm.” What does this mean? It simply means that these false teachers offer thrills, delights, exciting new freedoms for the body and soul but in reality they are empty and barren. Most people end up dying of thirst and hunger when following these false teachers. Peter warns that whoever listens to these false teachers will not be satisfied.

Peter says in verse 18: “For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.” (18) This is why these false teachers are so terribly dangerous. They speak well as if they are absolutely confident in what they are saying. Most people like to hear that they can follow Christ, and at the same time enjoy the desires of their human nature since God himself gave them those desires. It is not hard to understand why those who are not grounded in the gospel can be easily taken away from the truth faith, and given a false faith to stand on.

Moreover, verse 19 says: “They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.” As children of God, we are not meant to be mastered by anything in this world, especially not by our desires. But false teachers promise these unstable and weak people freedom. How can they offer freedom when they themselves are slaves to their lusts? In our sinful nature, we all want to be free; free to do what we want, free to live by our own standard and free to give in to all the natural desires that flood our hearts. We would love it if God would just offer us salvation, and then just leave us alone to enjoy our lives. False teachers tempt those who are struggling to overcome their sinful nature and tendencies. They offer them not freedom that Christ promises us which is freedom from sin but they offer them freedom from the pains of struggle by saying “You no longer have to struggle to overcome your desires, they are normal desires that are very much part of who you are as a human being.” That is not freedom at all, it is slavery to our desire and passion. Christ is our sovereign Lord. When we acknowledge that Jesus bought us with his blood, we become his. The freedom that Christ gives us is the freedom from sin. The freedom these people offer us is the freedom to sin. There is a difference. But we cannot go wrong as long as we know that Christ is our sovereign Lord.

**Part 2. Destruction is not sleeping**

Sometime when we look around, we see ungodly people (false teachers) seemed to be so prosperous. They had no struggles. Their bodies were healthy and strong. They are so confident and full of themselves. It tells us that if our final destiny is not known in general godly people are vulnerable to envying the ungodly. In verse 3b, Peter’s words here are sharp. “Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.” Peter was not expressing his own sentiment toward the false teachers, but the certainty of God’s judgment based on what God has done throughout history. And in verses 4-9, to prove his point, Peter gives three separate examples of how God dealt with the rebellious people of the past. God judged angels when they rebelled, and keeps them chained in dungeons for the Day of Judgment. It’s hard for us to understand this, but that doesn’t mean that we should take it lightly or ignore it. In Noah’s time, people corrupted God’s standard of marriage; it was a kind of sexual corruption. And it did not stop there. The corruption spread throughout the homes, then the communities, then the society and eventually the whole world was corrupted and wicked. People had become like animals, living by their flesh desires until there was no one left to honor God except Noah and his family. God judged the world with the flood, but he rescued Noah and his family at that time. Then in Lot’s time, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah fell into sexual immorality of the worst kind. And there was no one left in the entire land who had not fallen into ungodly practices. The entire city was burnt down to ashes. People may choose not to believe this but it does not change the fact that God’s judgment came upon the angels, the people of Noah’s time and the prosperous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. From this we can learn that God judged the angels who sinned, so no one is too high to be judged. God judged everyone in the ancient world before the flood, so God doesn't grade on a curve. God judged Sodom and Gomorrah, so even the prosperous can be judged. The second coming of Christ is mentioned many times in the Bible. Having faith in God’s promises we are to look forward to the judgement day not with fear but with full anticipation from the assurance we have in Christ for our salvation.

**Part 3. The righteous will be delivered.**

Look at verse 9. “If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the Day of Judgment.” Peter shows us that the Lord delivered righteous men Noah and Lot from the rebellious people. Lot was righteous in God’s eyes, though perhaps it was hard for others to see his righteousness. Yet the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah tormented his righteous soul from day to day. Lot’s soul was tormented, but he failed to follow through with godly actions and separate himself and his family from the ungodliness of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord delivered Lot because of his righteous soul; yet Lot lost everything because of his too-close association with those wicked cities. The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations: Even as the Lord delivered Lot, He knows how to deliver us from the temptations we face, and He knows how to reserve the unjust for the Day of Judgment. We can trust in God’s deliverance of the godly because it is just as certain as His judgment of the ungodly. God will deliver us from the very day of judgment, from the very time of wrath that He pours out on the earth (Revelation 3:10).

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, Peter pictures the real possibility that by learning of Christ some people make a beautiful start in the Christian life, and they seem to be away from the corruption of the world outwardly. The reality is unless they hold on to their calling and election firmly they could easily fall as Jesus says in Luke 8:14 the cares and riches and pleasures of life choke the young plant, and it wither and bear no fruit and dies. Moreover, in verse 21 Peter warns the more evidence you have of Christ's reality, the more severe your judgment for not repenting. Peter counsels the new converts: if you forsake the way now, after all you have learned and experienced, your doom will be more miserable than the pagans'. I got one demonstration form John Piper. The doctor gave a patient ten days worth of antibiotics and said, "Don't stop taking them after five days just because your sore throat clears up. If you do, it may flare up all the worse." So it is in the Christian life: if we stop trusting the heavenly doctor and disobey his prescription for our redemption, our latter state will be worse than the former. The more revelation you have in Christ the more you are accountable for your actions. Peter’s words in these verses do not mean that a true Christian and child of God can lose their calling and salvation. It merely means that just being a member of the church, and knowing what the gospel teaches, does not guarantee that one is safe form the judgment of God. People take God’s judgment so very lightly, like those who think that there is never going to be a judgment day when God will bring us to account. People listen to the gospel message. But if they do not accept the gospel message and submit themselves to the Lord who calls them to repent and believe, they end up living a lie and returning to the vomit of the world they came from. We must be serious about receiving the gospel and being rooted and grounded in it. It is what Peter is telling us here, it is what God wants for us. In 2 Peter 1:10“Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall.” You can be saved from judgment if you repent and trust the Master who bought you by his blood. When it says the Lord knows how to deliver the godly (v. 9), it doesn't mean he only delivers the perfect. Lot was far from perfect. But God saved him from the judgement because of his faith regardless of his many failures. Jesus promises us in John 6:40 “For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.” Let the word of God and promises of God guide our life until we are sure and secure in our calling and election.