

2 Peter 2:17-22

False Teachers, the Gnostic Disconnect, and Evangelical Immorality

By Jay Wegter

INTRODUCTION: The more I study the Word of God and the great divines such as Spurgeon and Whitfield, the more convinced I am that applying Scripture to the conscience is at the heart of real preaching. The warnings found in Scripture are there to induce ruthless honesty before God (penetrate the strongholds of sin). In fact, warnings and genuine self-examination go together. Warnings aimed at the conscience are needed because self-love tends to short circuit self-examination. God uses warnings like an alarm clock to wake up sleepy consciences.

We have seen in previous lessons on 2 Peter 2, that the religious landscape today is strewn with churches that preach only comfortable messages —relatively few churches today are characterized by faithfully warning their flocks. How grateful we are for the Apostle Peter's epistles, for he is faithful in warning us about the terrible destiny of false teachers and their followers.

This issue of delivering warnings from Scripture has hit me really hard these last few months. I write a monthly article for our ministry, and this month's article is titled: "Have we forgotten how to warn?" "The tragedy of perishing under comfortable preaching." (Pastor Hegg is a subscriber.)

The Apostle Peter did not preach comfortable sermons (Acts 2:22-24, 36). And the book of 2 Peter is proof of that. The awful eternal destiny of the false teachers and their apostate followers is meant to be a check, a warning to us, lest we should entertain any curiosity about the passing pleasures of sin (or of any false doctrine which would permit sin).

It is intensely interesting that 2 Peter 2 and the little **book of Jude** have so much in common. We can assume that Peter and Jude knew each other and that they discussed the problems which plagued the early church. (Though, I would add that their epistles are individually written and inspired by the Holy Spirit and are infallible Scripture.) In the book of Jude we are given a little deeper look into the error taught by the false teachers.

"Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you **contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ**" (Jude 3-4).

"Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly

dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever” (Jude 11-13).

This leads us to verses 17-18 in this passage in 2 Peter 2 and it gives us insight into the errors being taught. But first, here is the outline of 2 Peter 2:17-22:

I. Luring the unwary (vv. 17-18)

II. Licentiousness, the bait (vv. 18-19)

III. Liberty; the counterfeit offer (v. 19)

IV. Loss of all resolve (v. 20)

V. The Lake of Fire; their final destiny (vv. 21-22)

I. Luring the unwary (vv. 17-18)

17. “These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. **18.** For speaking out arrogant *words* of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error” (**vv. 17-18**).

v. 17 – Waterless springs—is imagery picturing a desert traveler—he comes to what looks like an oasis, but the well is totally dry. The false teachers can provide no delivery on their promises. By contrast to these **dry springs**; our Savior offers the thirsty sinner, **living water** (Jn 4:10), and He promises that this living water **would become a well springing up into eternal life** (v. 14).

Now contrast this abundance which is in Christ to the empty promises of the heretics. It brings to mind the Gnostic errors which were afflicting the early church. We could summarize the way that error was heretically incorporated into Christianity: **the human spirit is what survives the grave—it is what God cares about. Therefore, what you do with your body is inconsequential by comparison.** Wow! That would sure solve a lot of the sense of defeat as we struggle with our remaining corruption. Do you see how this doctrinal error could let the drawbridge down to permit sensual sin to enter the castle of the soul? Thus, the false teachers offered a kind of **Gnostic disconnect**: you could be both religious and sensual; both spiritual and sexually active outside of marriage.

Consider just how much Paul had to combat that error in his epistles: “The body is for the Lord, not for immorality” (1 Cor 6:13). “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19). “We must give an account of the deeds done in the body—whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10). “If you live according to the flesh, you must die” (Rom 8:13). “God is not mocked . . . those who sow to the flesh will from the flesh reap corruption” (Gal 6:7-8). “If you give the members of your earthly body to immorality, impurity, passion and greed it is idolatry” (Col 3:5).

v. 18 – We see in these verses that the false teachers prefer to **go after new converts** as opposed to seasoned believers (see **Eph 4:14** on the vulnerability of immature Christians: “As a result, we

are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.”).

These false teachers have a captivating way of speaking, they become popular—they are able to win the admiration of many—it results in the entrapment of the unwary (Note Paul’s warning in Acts 20:29-30—the false teachers in the churches will get disciples to follow them).

Thus, Peter has a **deep concern** for new Christians who have recently escaped a worldly way of life. Here is a literal rendering of the Greek which describes who the heretics are snaring: *They trap those who are just beginning to escape from among people who live in error. (That is they have temporarily escaped from the pagan Gentile population who continues to live in spiritual darkness.)*

As this chapter reaches its graphic climax, Peter makes a very devastating very pronouncement on these heretics in order to issue the strongest caution to faithful believers. Stay sharp, be discerning, examine everything by Scripture (2 Pet 3:17-18).

II. Licentiousness; the bait (vv. 18-19)

18. “For speaking out arrogant *words* of vanity they **entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality**, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, **19. promising them freedom** while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by **what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved**” (vv. 18-19).

Heretics’ Pitch (*how the hook was baited*): “Grace covers everything; it has finally once for all taken the danger out of sin. Aren’t you tired of living a buttoned up legalistic defeated lifestyle? Get rid of the straightjacket. You are no longer under law. The Spirit in you will live your Christian life for you, trust yourself. You are special, God wanted you so badly, He has made you His and He no longer sees any sin in His own.” Brethren, **this is an invitation to NOT fear God**. These heretics were issuing ‘doctrinal hall passes’ to live a life of indulging the flesh (without fear of consequences). (Note Foucault and no consequence sex.)

The most successful **ad campaign Las Vegas ever produced** was: “What happens here stays here.” Wow! You can take a moral holiday and experience no consequences. That’s only a slight alteration of what Satan said in the Garden, “You surely shall not die!” (Gen 3:4). It is breathtaking how many attributes of God are denied in the five word ad for Vegas.

But these false teachers, in the name of freedom have drawn their hearers away from divine law and thrust them into uncontrolled license (Calvin). They talk in a way which proves that they do not know the Son of God. For, Christ is the destroyer of sin (**1 Jn 3:8**). He sets free from the shackles of sin by the knowledge of Himself (**Jn 8:36**).

III. Liberty; the counterfeit offer (v. 19)

18. “For speaking out arrogant *words* of vanity they **entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality**, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, 19. **promising them freedom** while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by **what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved**” (vv. 18-19).

The ‘freedom’ offered by the heretics was a freedom from the gospel obligation to serve Christ and grow in Him (See 2 Peter 1:3-11). **What the false teachers had disguised as new spiritual insights about liberty was only the old bondage in the garb of spiritualized language.**

To imitate the lifestyle of those who were corrupting themselves is the worst possible bondage—because it comes in religious dress. Peter is exposing the perniciousness of this error so that the godly will **not look to any liberty** other than that which leads them to (when freed from sin) to willingly **obey unto righteousness**. Genuine Christian liberty demands mortification of the flesh (Col 3:5) (Calvin).

Let’s think for a moment how different the liberty is which **Christ has purchased** from the false liberty of the apostates. Christ has released us from the yoke of the law in so far as it subjects us to damnation. [This deliverance is] so that we might be freed from the dominion of sin—in order to serve God in newness of life (See Romans 6-7).

Now the **moral law is immutable—it is God’s character in code**—it is the ‘shape’ of holiness and godliness and is eternal in its binding nature. Before regeneration the law showed us our ruined state. Now that we have the Spirit, we fulfill what has become the Royal Law of Love (Rom 8:4; Rom 13:8; James 2:8).

IV. Loss of all resolve (vv. 19-20)

19. “. . . promising them freedom while they themselves are **slaves of corruption**; for by what a man is **overcome**, by this he is **enslaved**. 20. For if, **after they have escaped the defilements** of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and **are overcome**, the last state has become worse for them than the first” (vv. 19-20).

A proposed freedom that is actually slavery is no freedom. Peter wants us to know the **dangerous nature of this sect**—it takes men consecrated to God and **drags them back** again into the old impurity and corruptions of the world (Calvin). To knowingly despise the commands of God is to quench the light, throw away grace, and exhibit ingratitude.

The “knowledge of Christ” here means the gospel, for the good news is meant to lead us away from the defilements of the world into the way of righteousness (Calvin). To faithfully learn Christ is to make progress in the gospel so that we learn from Him (our Savior) to put off the old man and put on the new man:

“That, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of* God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:22-24).

It is inexcusable argues Peter to return to the old defilements and to become enslaved afresh—for that is a revolt against the gospel (Ibid.). In fact, to operate by one's fleshly desires, allowing them to be the standard for one's behavior, is to make oneself an enemy of the cross of Christ. Bad doctrine always yields bad fruit:

“For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is *their* appetite, and *whose* glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things” (Phil 3:18-19).

Now it is true that **the faithful still sin, but they do not let sin reign** (as king) in their members. They fight against it, mortifying it. They do not resign themselves to sin, and ‘sell’ themselves to do evil as it is described in the OT (1 Ki 21:20; 2 Ki 17:17).

At one time these false teachers and their followers had renounced the world's corruptions and had professed to be followers of Christ. But they had only left the world momentarily; now they have been entangled again—returning to the defilement of sordid sin (NTC). The main point is that they stopped resisting sin—**they are not overcomers** (which is the condition for victory, for completing the race) but have **allowed themselves to be overcome**.

Jesus likened this re-enslavement to a cast out demon bringing his evil associates with them to inhabit a well-swept house: “Then it goes and takes *along* seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first” (Lu 11:26).

Dear brethren, our fight of faith for holy living is in no way contradictory to grace. The Puritans were amazingly qualified at preaching the free grace of God, but at the same time they issued frequent warnings in their sermons: “You still have a hell to avoid and a heaven to gain.” Does that erode the grace of God in any way? No, it is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. It is the overcomers who inherit eternal glory (**Rev 21:7**).

V. The Lake of Fire, their final destiny (vv. 21-22)

21. “For it would be better for them **not to have known the way of righteousness**, than having known it, to turn away from the **holy commandment handed on to them**. **22.** It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, *returns* to wallowing in the mire’” (**vv. 21-22**).

They rejected God's way in Christ as the only way of salvation. The “holy/sacred commandment” is the authoritative apostolic message. If these religious teachers would have been in possession of the true faith, they would have taught others the way of salvation and would have developed others spiritually. But they broke the chain of transmitting the true gospel. They **altered the gospel's content**, rejected its teaching and perverted the truth (NTC).

Now this whole situation is shocking to our sensibilities that these individuals began religion by professing Christ as Savior. How are we to think about this? Did they lose their salvation? It is very disturbing that these persons who named the Name of Christ actually proved

to be reprobates. How is it that they rushed headlong into vice without fear and shame? Well, in order to remove the offense to the faithful followers of Christ, Peter states of these false teachers that their own wickedness and defiled nature is the cause of their apostasy.

Having been ‘religious’ but never regenerated, they returned to pagan corruptions showing that their change was outward only. They reverted to their old ways demonstrating their true nature. Their false doctrine had been accommodated to outward religion—there was no inner change by the Holy Spirit.

Peter illustrates this tragic situation with some intensely graphic symbolism: puking dogs and stinking pigs. Both of these animals (by nature) have a habit of returning to impurity. Thus, we can see the appropriateness of this illustration. In the SOTM, Jesus also uses these two animals to illustrate particular individuals that are spiritually profane: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces” (Mt 7:6).

CONCLUSION: Peter does not preach comfortable sermons does he? No, this is a jarring—it is an alarming warning to the Christian community not to follow the immoral ways of these false teachers. This whole chapter has been focusing on that theme of the destiny of heretics/apostates (2 Peter 2—angels who sinned, Noah’s contemporaries, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah).

In **applying the burden of this text** to our own lives, this is a call to faithfulness and discernment. Vast portions of the church today make holiness of life unnecessary to get to heaven. The antinomian view is that no degree of obedience or holiness or purity or godliness, love, transformation, or repentance is necessary or required for entering heaven.

But, these antinomians argue that if heaven required practical obedience or holiness, it would nullify grace and contradict justification by faith alone. Not so, grace is inseparable from transforming power (1 Cor 15:10). Christ’s death is the foundation of sanctification (Rom 6:1-14). The only sin we fight successfully is forgiven sin. Thus, once-for-all justification through Christ is the basis for living a separated life (John Piper, “The God who Sanctifies”).

There is acute danger in any doctrine which separates faith from life, truth from practice, hope from holiness, and communion from commandment. In fact the books of Colossians and 1 John were written to combat these false (dualistic) spiritualities that were plaguing the churches.

The false teachers of Peter’s day and our day taught a **half gospel**—namely that grace is merely a **get out of judgment ‘free’ card**. They purposely neglected the marvelous goal of grace which is to make us like Christ in holiness (Eph 1:4).

When we think about the work of redemption, does Christ save a true believer from sin or from hell? You know it is salvation from both. But the false teachers denied that Christ saves from hell **BY saving us from sin**. The warranty of justification is your sanctification. If you lack sanctification, your claim to justification is spurious (Jas 2:17).

Now a final note of encouragement in view of this hard text: true believers are often troubled and shocked by the amount of corruptions which still remain in them. Our great hope is Christ Himself. He is our righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus,

who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord’ (1 Cor 1:30-31).

True believers persevere in the pursuit of holiness because Christ perseveres in holding them and interceding for them. They do not lie down in sin, consenting to be overcome by it. They do not fall away. They do not desert the profession of sound doctrine (1 Tim 4:6-8; **6:3**; 2 Tim 1:13-14). “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with **the doctrine conforming to godliness**” (1 Tim 6:3).

True believers vigorously resist the flesh with its lusts. They walk by faith in the promises of God and are overcomers (1 Jn 5:4-5). They look to their Savior for overcoming strength when they are tempted (Heb 2:18). They live devoted to Christ as those who have been called with a holy calling (2 Tim 1:9).