

LIVING ON EARTH WITH A DIVINE NATURE - Part nine

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket

False Teachers and Their Teaching

2 Peter 2:1-3 - “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. [2] And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. [3] And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.”

There is no way of missing the sudden change of tone upon entering the second chapter of this letter from Peter. Without any doubt it is one of the sternest collection of thoughts and warnings in all the Scriptures.

If we weren't teaching our way **right through** the whole letter, a church would rarely, if ever, read these words in worship service. Of course, that is one of the primary benefits of studying a whole book in sequence. You don't get to choose the topics you like. The subjects are laid out for you in advance. If you're going to be thorough and honest you have to take to heart all the warnings of the Holy Spirit in this text.

The last three verses of the first chapter are the link to the second chapter - “**And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, [Darkness is the word Peter uses to describe the very best concepts of the present culture without the acceptance of divine revelation] **until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, [20] knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. [21] For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:19-21).****

This is the foundation for truth in the church. We have God's sure revelation. These Scriptures aren't the thoughts and ideas of men. God has spoken. God has revealed. We don't choose or modify the content. Our lives are to be anchored in the Scriptures.

But then Peter warns the church of a great danger. Not everyone teaches Scriptural truth. Not all the teachers and preachers and leaders are speaking the mind of Father God. He makes his point absolutely clear - “**There will be false teachers among you” (2:1).** There is no doubt in Peter's mind. He is absolutely certain about it - “**There will be false teachers among you.”**

I'm not sure the church **expects** false teachers to be active or even present anymore. “Perhaps in the Old Testament there were false prophets and teachers, but we have been given the Holy Spirit. False teachers wouldn't have a chance in the church today. **I** would never be taken in by false teaching!”

The whole issue of false teachers in the church raises some tricky questions. **Why** would God allow false teachers in His church? Isn't He sovereign? Doesn't He care about His flock? Why would Peter have to warn this New Testament congregation about the false teachers that were certainly going to come?

Let me give what I think is the best answer to that “why” question, because I think the Bible **does** give a clear answer in some dusty old verses from the book of Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 - “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, [2] **and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass**, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' [3] you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. **For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.** [4] “You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. [5] But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”

The important words are in **verse 3** - “.... you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. **For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.**” God is testing people through the words of these false teachers. Here's how the test works:

The words of the false teachers seem to have power. Their message seems to work - their predictions **come true**. These people are full of the supernatural. They leave people in awe. Why do their words ring so true? The text says **God** makes sure their words come true. So, they gather quite a following around themselves. People like what they hear. They like what they see.

But there's a problem. These leaders begin to depart from the sure word of the Lord. They modify the **moral dimensions** of God's revelation. We'll see why they do that in just a minute.

Now, there was no Bible like you and I have. But there were the commandments. People did know God had spoken on the mount to Moses. And these teachers, who were saying and doing amazing things, were teaching things **contrary** to those commandments of God.

In other words, there is enough power manifest to meet their felt needs, with accurate predictions about rain and crops and success, but what they're saying, while on a surface level is **satisfying**, isn't **filling their minds** with the truth about God and His Word. So here comes the test. Would the people listen to these leaders (whom **God** had empowered) and have their desires catered to, or would the people refuse to be compromised and remain true to the **content of God's revealed Word**.

Now, to be sure, Deuteronomy doesn't actually teach that God **brings** all these false teachers among His people. But, I believe, the text **does** teach that, in His great sovereignty, God **uses** even these false teachers to do some good.

God says, "I still have a plan for all these false teachers among you. I'm the one empowering them. I'm the one giving them such success. Now I want to find out whether you will follow whatever seems new and powerful, or will you remain rooted in My revealed word."

God still tests people by what they listen to and what they respond to. This whole issue is still alive and well today. Like it or not, every letter in the New Testament warns the church about false teaching. We worry about a lack of **blessing**. God worries about a lack of **truth**. Of course, we don't have to **choose between those two things**. But we do have to be careful and cautious.

Let's look at what Peter has to say about these false teachers in the church:

1) **PETER SAYS FALSE TEACHERS ARISE IN THE CHURCH IN SUCH A GRADUAL AND SUBTLE WAY THAT THEY AREN'T EVEN NOTICED BY THE CARELESS**

2 Peter 2:1 - "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.

Obviously, you don't **invite** these people into your church. You don't post an ad on line, "**False Teachers This Sunday!**" Peter says they arise from **within** the church itself. He says they gain a platform **secretly** among people who will listen. Peter says these churches are to **actually expect** that these false teachers will arise. He warns them to be looking out for them. Peter's not being paranoid or morbid. But he doesn't want these Christians taken by surprise. He doesn't want them to just assume that everything they will hear is going to be the truth.

It is constantly amazing to me how many people don't even think in terms of teaching being true or false. It's much more common for people to measure truth by how it makes them feel, or how comfortable they are with it, or whether it meets their needs. Truth and error don't even seem to enter into the equation in many people's minds.

How many times at some Bible study will someone ask, "**What do these verses mean to you?**", instead of the only question that counts - "**What do these verses mean?**"

That's precisely why Peter writes these words. False teaching can meet felt needs. False teaching can pack great power. It can attract larger crowds than sound doctrine. False teaching can be accompanied by miracles. False teaching can soothe hearts and minds. False teaching can have great appeal. But, for all of that, it will still be false teaching if it is not rooted in the Word of God.

So as Peter gets ready to leave this earth - as he says his final farewell to this group of churches - he warns them that this threat to their souls is coming. "**There will be false teachers among you! You need to be alert. They don't advertise themselves. They come in secretly. They seem compassionate and godly. That's why I'm alerting you in advance.**"

Listen, it is dangerous and it is wrong for you to feel that there could never be false teaching in Cedarview Community Church. I wish that were the truth. The pastors and leaders try their best to make sure that it is so. But you should never **assume** it. Always stay alert. Always measure by God's Word.

2) **PETER CAUTIONS AGAINST THE HORRIBLE HUMAN TENDENCY TO MEASURE THE TRUTHFULNESS OF A MESSAGE BY THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO LISTEN TO IT**

2 Peter 2:2 - "And **many will follow their sensuality**, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed."

Now, the obvious point of application in this verse comes from that word, **many** - "**....many will follow...**" This is such a common temptation for all of us that it's no wonder Peter warns us in advance against it. People will always follow a crowd. You can see this principle in the use of polls and surveys in our society. We all long to know what **most** people are thinking on any subject.

But what may not be quite so obvious in this verse is the **reason** so many people will follow these false teachers. Look at it again: **2 Peter 2:2** - "And many will **follow their sensuality**, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed."

At first glance, that word **sensuality**, almost seems out of place in a verse about teaching. Does Peter mean these teachers were holding orgies in the church basement? No, but I did come across this interesting comment on this very verse in a commentary written in 1658, by **Alexander Nisbet**: "**It is not strange to see the most dangerous heretics have many followers, every error being a close friend to some fallen lust.**"

Understand. Peter isn't talking about false teaches and their craven sexuality. He means that false teachers appeal to something in the listeners. They seek out inner motivations. The message is, to use Peter's term, one of **sensuality** in that it appeals to some fallen desire - the desire for **prosperity** - the desire for **health** - th desire for **peace of mind** - the desire for **acceptance** - the desire to be **liked by my peers** - the desire to appear **accepting at all cost**.

Paul describes this very same process in **2 Timothy 4:3** - "For the time is coming when people will not **endure sound teaching**, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to **suit their own passions....**"

"**...To suit their own passions.**" The message fits with the dominant state of mind like a tailored suit fits the one wearing it. Please notice, sound doctrine is linked with that word "**endure**." Sound doctrine must be endured because it never does line up with our own desires or the tastes of the surrounding culture. Sound doctrine **confronts** our desires. It doesn't stroke. In another place Paul says sound doctrine rebukes, corrects and instructs. Well, people don't pile up teachers like that for themselves.

Then notice, Paul says there is another kind of teacher. This teacher teaches according to the desires of the people. Paul says these teachers scratch where the people itch. Doesn't it feel great to have your back scratched in just the right place? No wonder Paul says the people don't have to **endure** those teachers. He says they **accumulate** those teachers. They collect them.

So Peter says you can't judge the **truthfulness** of the teaching by the number of followers. You can judge the **popularity** of the teaching. But never the **truthfulness** of it.

But there is still another truth in this second verse. It's one that is frequently overlooked. And it's even more sobering than the others we've looked at:

3) **AS PEOPLE TAMPER WITH THE TRUTH, AND AS FALSE TEACHING GAINS ANY HEARING IN THE CHURCH, PEOPLE LOSE THEIR APPETITE FOR THE TRUTH OF GOD'S WORD**

Look carefully at the last phrase in that second verse:

2 Peter 2:2 - "And many will follow their sensuality, and **because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed.**"

It's hard to give those words enough weight. Notice the downward cycle of error. As more and more people just begin to give an ear to error, as they find the message more and more to their liking, as things that are off base get

taken with increasing seriousness, **people actually begin to devalue - to marginalize - things that they once valued as true.**

This is the sure work of the enemy. It's not just that these people - these people in the church - don't hunger for the truth as much anymore. They actually begin to **deny it all together.** They **relativize** it.

Other people watch. They too begin to lose confidence in the truths they once believed. They begin to question the foundation of the faith. "Surely, if so many people are starting to think like this then my old beliefs must be hopelessly outdated. Perhaps I've just been judgmental or intolerant. Why would these intelligent people follow this other teaching?" And the value of the truth is undercut in their minds.

Interest in the truth is not something you can turn on and off. A love for the truth is **grown over time** as you learn the truth, study the truth, and obey the truth. Give your heart, even briefly, to the fashionable sparkle of error and you lose, bit by bit, both your **appetite** for the truth, and your **discernment** of the truth. The way of the truth gets **"maligned,"** Peter says.

4) **MOST FALSE TEACHING HAS ITS ROOT IN GREED AND OFFERS A MESSAGE THAT APPEALS TO SELF**

2 Peter 2:3 - "And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep."

The greed referred to probably isn't for money. It's the love of acceptance. It's the love of not offending - of not standing out - of not having to **"endure"** sound doctrine, to use Peter's words.

As always, the kind of teaching that has the most appeal is the kind that **offers** rather than **requires.** Most false teaching majors on benefits to be had rather than duties to be performed.

"Well, what about that, pastor Don? Isn't the Christian message one of grace? Isn't it all about what God has **done for us** rather than what **we do for Him?**"

Absolutely. And Peter wouldn't deny that for all the world. The real issue isn't whether or not ours is a gospel of grace. **It is.** The real question is, **what is that grace like? And how is it received? And what does it do in my life?**

There's an arresting verse in Jude that deals with the very same issue Peter was addressing in his letter: **Jude 4 - "For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."**

Note the careful use of those authority words, **"Master and Lord."** Our commitment to revealed truth isn't an **optional** commitment. It's not an elective in the walk of discipleship.

Don't those words sound so much like our caution from Peter? Teachers creeping in secretly, even denying the Lord Jesus Christ? But **how** were they denying Jesus? Were they saying Jesus wasn't the Son of God? No they weren't. Weren't they preaching grace. Yes, they were. But they were preaching grace in such a way that they were actually denying the message of the cross. Jude says they had turned **grace** into **sensuality.**

The KJV actually uses the word **licentiousness** in place of **sensuality.** We don't use that word **licentiousness** much anymore. But we do use the word **license.** We still talk about giving a person **license** to do something - "Well, I know he shouldn't have done that, but there were unusual circumstances, so I'll grant him license in this case."

Jude says you actually **deny Jesus Christ when you treat grace as a license to skirt around revealed truth.** And that's what was at the root of the message of the false teachers in 2 Peter chapter 2. The message was rooted in personal greed. The message was geared to exploit people by just granting them all their wishes. The cross was taken out of the message. The cost of following Jesus was ignored and covered. Obedience was shouted down as being legalistic.

Here's why all this matters so much. All of these warnings need to be heeded. But, perhaps even more importantly, all of these warnings need to be heeded **with the right spirit and understanding.** The warnings are serious. But they are not without spiritual life. There's a reason Peter says what he says, even in these hard sounding verses. Let me remind you what his reason is:

2 Peter 1:19 - “And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts....”

Hear the heart of Father God. He wants to light up your heart. He wants to shine His love and power into your earthly days. He wants to strengthen your daily living with the fuel of His precious and magnificent promises. ***But even God can only do that through the truth.*** Don't sell yourself short. Beware of false teachers. More on this important subject next time.