

Title: Facing False Teaching (2 Peter 2:1-22)

Series: Following Jesus

October 7, 2018

It is a joy to stand in this pulpit this morning and open up the word of God with you today. The last time I preached here, it was a warm Sunday morning in late May. Now it's a cold Sunday morning in early October. Let me invite you to turn to 2 Peter 2 and follow along with me as we continue our look at this letter. If you are using one of our blue Bibles available in the back of the room, we are on page 1894.

Over the last few weeks we have been working through a series we are calling 'Following Jesus.' That sums up what the Christian faith is all about. It's not about finding religion. It's not about fostering good behavior. It's not about feeling better about ourselves. It's about following Jesus.

Two weeks ago, Pastor Jerry reminded us from 2 Peter 1 that God has given us everything we need to live out the call to follow Jesus. One of the greatest gifts God has given us to equip us for discipleship is His word. Last week we looked at the second half of chapter 1 where we saw that God has not left us in the dark. God has given us the Scriptures to illuminate the path of discipleship for us.

As we come to chapter 2, you'll notice that Peter's tone changes. We go from words of encouragement to words of warning. Peter saw the need to warn believers about a growing threat to their walk with Christ: the rise of false teaching. There are a number of things going on in this chapter, and next week Pastor Jerry is going to bring us back to chapter 2 to look at another theme. This morning, we are going focus in on Peter's warning about the presence of false teaching.

What I hope we're able to take away today is this: **As Jesus' disciples, we need to be able to spot counterfeit teaching lest we follow a counterfeit gospel.**

Think for a moment about that word "counterfeit." We've all probably seen someone at the bank or at a store use one of those special pens to test a \$50 or \$100 bill. A quick swipe reveals whether the money you've just handed the cashier is authentic and valuable or fake and worthless. There will always be people who try to scam the system by printing counterfeit cash for their own benefit. But there is another reason why someone might want to print counterfeit money. Historically, countries have tried to destabilize the economies of enemy nations by printing counterfeit bills. As author Trevin Wax notes,

"By imitating the genuine, the counterfeit money creates confusion and typically distorts the value of real currency. The counterfeit works because it mimics the real deal so well that customers and businesses spread the fake money until even governments are affected" (Wax, 12).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wax, Trevin. Counterfeit gospels : rediscovering the good news in a world of false hope. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2011. Print.

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Counterfeiters try to create confusion, distort value, and mimic what is real. That sounds to me a lot like what the devil tries to do when he raises up false teachers.

Writing to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul said,

“And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants also masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve” (2 Corinthians 11:12-15, NIV).

Even the devil himself recognizes the strategic advantage of drawing our attention to realistic counterfeits of genuine Christianity. That’s why Peter was writing this warning to the believers who first received this letter. **As Jesus’ disciples, we need to be able to spot counterfeit teaching lest we follow a counterfeit gospel.**

Peter introduces this warning against counterfeit Christianity by stating two important facts. You’ll see them both there in verse 1. First, Peter gives his readers a history lesson. He says that in the days of God’s *true* prophets, those who, as he said in the last verse of chapter 1, “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” in those days there were also *false* prophets among the people.

For example, God’s prophet, Jeremiah spoke these words:

“This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They keep saying to those who despise me, ‘The LORD says: You will have peace.’ And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, ‘No harm will come to you’” (Jeremiah 23:16-17, NIV).

The fact is, just as there were false prophets during the Old Testament era, so too will there be false teachers on this side of history. The obvious emphasis here, whether we’re talking about Old Testament false prophets or modern day false teachers, is that their message is *false*. Their teaching directly contradicts the revealed will and word of God. But, like counterfeit money, their message mimics the truth, creates confusion, and seeks to undermine the value of what God has actually said.

Again, we can trace that strategy back to Satan himself. Do you remember the dialogue between Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden?

**“Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”” (Genesis 3:1, NIV).**

*Did God really say that?* From the beginning Satan has been trying to introduce a counterfeit gospel into the world in order to mimic, confuse, and distort the truth of what God has said to us in His word.

There is a second fact that Peter wants to alert his readers to and it comes right on the heels of the fact that there will always be false teachers. Peter says in verse 1 that there will always be false teachers *among us*. We all know that the world is filled with other teachings, philosophies, religions, and worldviews that not only conflict with biblical Christianity, they are wholly opposed to the gospel message. That’s not what Peter is warning against. Peter’s warning is that false teachers will arise from within our own camp. They aren’t outsiders weaseling their way into the church, they’re insiders introducing a counterfeit gospel among the believers.

**Fact one: there will always be false teachers. Fact two: false teachers will arise among you.** With those two facts in mind, I want to show you five features of false teaching from this text. Why do we want to consider these five features of false teaching? Because as we said earlier, as Jesus’ disciples, we need to be able to spot counterfeit teaching lest we follow a counterfeit gospel. And just as an aside, this was no theoretical exercise for Peter. He wasn’t highlighting these features of false teaching in case such teachings started to arise. They were already present. Counterfeit Christianity had already been introduced in their midst and it was already creating confusion among the believers.

The first feature of false teaching that Peter highlights is that **false teaching dilutes the message of the gospel**. You’ll notice in the second half of verse 1 how Peter describes the counterfeiting strategy of these false teachers: “They will secretly introduce destructive heresies” (v. 1b).

This past August when we moved to Bemidji we bought a house. And as is typical when buying a house, there were a few things that the previous owners included with the house that were new to us. One of the things that came with our house is a hot tub. Now, we were not looking for a house with a hot tub, and a hot tub isn’t something we would have gone out and purchased for ourselves, but we’re not exactly complaining that it came with the property. Here’s the thing about hot tubs though. It’s not like filling up the bathtub and taking a dip. A healthy hot tub requires a fair amount of understanding of water chemistry. It makes me wish I had paid more attention in high school chemistry class when we were studying things like pH, alkalinity, water hardness, and the properties of H<sub>2</sub>O. Multiple times a week I’m out there testing the water and adjusting the chemicals as needed. But here’s the thing. Once a person gets in the hot tub, the chemistry changes. We actually contaminate the water. You can’t

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see it. You don't realize that the water chemistry is changing, but it is. And if it goes undetected, the water quality in that hot tub can degrade rather quickly.

That's the idea behind Peter's words in verse 1. These false teachers were secretly introducing what Peter calls "destructive heresies." They were introducing contaminants, teachings that did not align with the gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed to the Apostles and handed down to the church.

Peter uses the word "heresy" here, and that word might cause us to think about radical departures from Christian doctrine. But what Peter has in mind here is a bit more subtle. The word he uses that gets translated as "heresy" can simply refer to a school of thought. Today we might call this simply a different perspective or another way of looking at things.

As harmless as that may sound, Peter warns here that *any* departure from the gospel as revealed in Jesus Christ, no matter how harmless it may appear, actually dilutes the message of the gospel. And if the gospel is not the gospel as revealed in Christ and taught by the apostles, it isn't the gospel. Listen to what the Apostle Paul had to say on the subject of diluting the gospel:

**"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!" (Galatians 1:6-9, NIV).**

Peter goes on in this chapter to show how these false teachers dilute the message of the gospel. In verse 3 Peter points to "fabricated stories" that had arisen out of greed. They were they original purveyors of fake news! In verse 14 they are described as seducing those who were "unstable" in their faith. In verse 15 their wandering away from the truth is compared to that of the notoriously greedy Old Testament false prophet, Balaam. In other words, these false teachers hadn't just slipped from the truth, they had walked away on purpose. They were false prophets looking to profit from teaching a false gospel.

But the urgent problem that Peter was addressing was not just that believers were hearing a false gospel and getting their doctrine wrong. This false gospel was beginning to shape the way they lived. That leads us to the second and third features of false teaching highlighted in this passage: **false teaching denies the Lord's authority and thus derails a godly lifestyle.**

In the previous chapter, Peter spoke about the godly lifestyle produced in a Christian who obeys his or her calling in Christ to live as his disciple. Peter is warning the church that the introduction of a diluted gospel leads to a denial of Jesus' authority, and ultimately, to a way of life that has derailed from the way of the truth. You can see this at the end of verse 1. These false teachers were "denying the sovereign Lord who bought them." That phrase is worth unpacking a bit.

The fact that they were "denying the sovereign Lord" meant that these false teachers were rejecting Jesus' authority. The ESV translates the phrase as "denying the Master." Scripture repeatedly teaches that Christ's death on the cross made a way of redemption for us. We were once slaves to sin, but by faith in Christ and through his saving work, we are redeemed and set free. Yet we are not set free to become our own master. That's what got us into trouble in the first place. Those whom Christ redeems now joyfully become, as Peter himself understands back in the introduction of his letter, servants or slaves of the Master, Jesus Christ. So in denying Jesus' authority, these false teachers proved that they never truly knew the redemption that is ours through Jesus Christ.

That denial of authority naturally led these false teachers and their followers down a path that would derail them from godly living. We see that in verse 10 where Peter is speaking about God's righteous judgement. Peter says, "This is especially true of those who follow the corrupt desire of the flesh and despise authority" (v. 10a). In verse 13 their ungodly lifestyle is evidenced by their unashamed "carous[ing] in broad daylight." In verse 14 Peter goes on to describe them as having "eyes full of adultery," and that they "never stop sinning." Their diluted gospel and denial of Jesus' authority opened them up in verse 18 to "mouth empty, boastful words" and to appeal to their hearers' "lustful desires of the flesh."

Peter makes it clear that this counterfeit Christianity embraced and endorsed by the false teachers will eventually result in God's judgment. He highlights two more features of false teaching in these verses. **False teaching defames the truth of the gospel and eventually leads to destruction.** First, Peter emphasizes that these false gospels and those who follow them will, as he says in verse 2, "bring the way of truth into disrepute." He goes on to describe these false teachers in verse 13 as "blots and blemishes." A counterfeit gospel creates enough confusion and distrust that the authentic message about Jesus Christ can get obscured.

Second, the ultimate end for those who teach and for those who follow a false gospel is destruction. It's never popular to talk about Hell and about God's righteous judgement, but Peter doesn't shy away from it in this passage. He repeatedly uses that word "destruction" as a warning to believers. How sad and ironic it is that what these false teachers were offering was a false sense of hope. In verse 17 Peter describes them as "springs without water." They promise life to those who are thirsty, but they lack the living water that only comes from knowing Christ Jesus. In verse 19 Peter says that

they “promise...freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity.” It’s no wonder that Peter says in verse 3 that “many will follow” these false teachers and their false gospel. They promise the one thing that every human being is searching for: freedom.

Folks, do you know what one of the fastest growing religions in America is? Technically it’s not an officially recognized religion, but it could be. In his book *Soul Searching*, author Christian Smith describes a growing religious philosophy that he calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism or MTD for short. He’s quick to point out that no one actually claims to be a follower of MTD, and yet this version of spirituality is becoming more and more common. Smith says that the MTD’s “creed” can be summarized in five statements of belief:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>2</sup>

I share this with you as we close to illustrate the fact that false teaching is not just a thing of the past, it’s still with us today. False gospels do not necessarily show up as radical departures from the truth. Rather, they are like counterfeits designed to mimic the truth, create confusion, and distort value. But the best way to spot a counterfeit is to be so familiar with the real thing, that when counterfeits do come, we have eyes to see and ears to hear so that we can discern what is false from the glorious truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. **As Jesus’ disciples, we need to be able to spot counterfeit teaching lest we follow a counterfeit gospel.**

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, Christian, and Melinda L. Denton. *Soul searching : the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.