

SERIES: 2 Peter: Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

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Those of us who consider ourselves to be serious Christ followers would understand that our beliefs and our behavior are surrendered to the truth of the Word of God—that we continually try to adjust our beliefs and behaviors according to what we learn to be true from the Scriptures. But someone that is what we might call just a cultural Christian—somebody that is a little bit religious in our culture, somebody that just wants to be spiritual—often it’s the opposite. They formulate their beliefs primarily based on their own opinions; out of their beliefs flow their behaviors, and then they pursue a church or a preacher to accommodate those beliefs. Basically, at the end of the day, you can find a church and a preacher that will agree with just about everything. In some ways it seems kind of clever—you know, you can have your cake and eat it too. I’ll determine my own belief system; I’ll determine how I want to live; now I just need to find a preacher that will tell me God’s okay with it. But Peter would say that is actually the road to destruction. That’s what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Peter, Chapter 2. Peter reminded us that our source of truth needs to be the authoritative, inspired, reliable Word of God, and reminded us of the prophets of old proclaiming the message of Jesus. But then that raises a concern! Chapter 2, verse 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.

(*NASB, 2 Peter 2:1)

Now we know through the history of the Old Testament that there was always a problem with false prophets...false teachers. Think of it this way: Any time there is something of great value, there is going to be a counterfeit of that. That’s true of truth! Paul referred to Satan as a liar, as the father of lies; he’s the master of the counterfeit. So, the prophets proclaimed the truth, but there was always a concern with false prophets that led people astray. Peter then says, “This is going to be equally true for us. There is truth, but there’s also counterfeit truth. There’s a deceiver that wants to lead people astray.” It’s worth noting that the concern is not with the atheist; the concern is not with the secularist. The concern is with that which rises from within—we might say under the umbrella of Christianity—those that seem to be saying the right thing, but they are actually in error and they lead people astray. The word that Peter uses is secretly...a word that means they smuggle in that which is untrue. Paul, writing about this in 2 Corinthians Chapter 11, says that “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” Clearly Paul is talking about religion and the Judaizers in that part of Corinthians. Someone comes along and smuggles in something that’s just a little off, and little by little people are led astray. Paul uses the exact same language in Galatians Chapter 2. His concern is for the legalists and he says, “They smuggle in that which sounds right, but it’s actually not right and little by little it leads people into bondage.” Peter says they

secretly introduce destructive heresies. That word heresies in my mind is a little bit misleading. It makes it sound like these are really overt, obvious errors, but the Greek word carries the idea simply of a sect, s-e-c-t. It's just the idea that it's a slight diversion from the truth that begins to create a following, and little by little they get farther and farther off the track. He says even denying the Master who bought them.

It would be right to say Jesus died for everyone, and yet Jesus' redemption is not appropriated to someone's life until that person chooses to receive God's gift of salvation. So, the Savior that bought them, that Savior has been denied by the false teachers; therefore, it swiftly leads them to destruction. Now there are different ways to deny Jesus and the core of the Gospel. It's really important we understand there's a difference between churches having differences and that which is heresy, a false teacher. So, for example, there are many Gospel preaching, Bible-believing churches, where we disagree on End Times theology; we disagree on mode of Baptism or whether babies should be baptized. We disagree on the way we organize ourselves; we disagree on whether or not people speak in tongues today and some of those types of things. Those aren't false teachers; they are just differences. False teaching goes more to the heart of the Gospel—what we would often refer to as the Person and work of Christ. To be a Christian church you must believe that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, the Creator of the Universe, who took on human flesh, lived a sinless life, was crucified for the sins of the world, was buried, rose again, and is coming back, and offers salvation freely as a gift of His grace. To deny any of that would be outside the boundaries of Orthodox Christianity, would be false teaching.

So, go back to Galatians Chapter 2, when Paul uses almost the identical wording as Peter—that there are those who introduce, smuggle in, teachings that are off from the message of the Gospel. Little by little they lead people astray. He says at the end of Chapter 2 that actually if you add one work of the Law to the Gospel of Grace, it ceases to be the Gospel of Grace and has become salvation through the Law. He ends that chapter by saying, “If you do that, you have actually nullified the Gospel of Grace and Christ died needlessly”—almost identical to the language of Peter—that you have denied the Master who bought you. You're determined to save yourself through your own self-righteousness. Now this is really important to understand because I think we have a tendency sometimes to think if people get the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus right, it's somewhat insignificant if they add additional works to salvation. We tend to think of it as, “Well, they have the core right; the rest is just like extra credit.” But you have to listen to the words of Paul in Galatians, “No, actually if you add one work to the Gospel of Grace, it ceases to be the Gospel of Grace and you have actually nullified the death of Christ on the cross for your sins.” That is a form of false teaching that denies the Master who bought them. In this case, Peter's concern is with probably the early forms of Gnosticism. That's the false teaching that most scholars think this is. The Gnostics' views were kind of confusing, but they did not believe that Jesus was fully God and fully man, and they certainly did not believe that Jesus was coming back. So, there was denial around the person and work of Christ. They were denying the Master who bought them, who died on the cross for their sins bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Verse 2:

Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned; and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; (Vs. 2-3a)

This is one of the clues that leads people to think that the false teachers are the Gnostics. The Gnostics believed that there was a separation between the physical and the spiritual. So, the spiritual was the part that connected with God and the physical was irrelevant to that. Therefore, what they taught was that you could indulge the flesh, live any kind of sensuous life you wanted to, and it had virtually no effect on your relationship with God. This is what was being promoted—this idea of sensuality, indulge the flesh, and somehow God is okay with that. So, Peter says many will follow that. Paul says that people find a message that tickles their ears, that tells them what they want to hear. “I want to find a preacher that will tell me that I can live as I please, indulge my flesh, and God is okay with that.” Many will follow that message. He says the result of that is the way of the truth is maligned—it is discredited—and in their greed they will exploit you with false words.

Now we could ask the question, “What would be the motive of the false teacher? Why would they teach such a thing?” One option is they are simply mistaken. For one reason or another they sincerely believe this to be true; they are just simply mistaken. That is certainly a possibility, but I would suggest to you that the overwhelming majority of false teachers have a much more sinister motive. Peter identifies it as greed—greed for money, greed for power, greed for control. I think the history of religion is the history of money, power and control. False teachers, in pursuing their greed for money, power and control, are willing to tell people anything they want to hear in order to pursue their agenda. Where the English text says they exploit you, the Greek is they literally merchandise you. You are not someone they genuinely care about; you are not someone they are genuinely trying to help with the truth; you’re merchandise. You’re a means to an end. They merchandise you for money; they merchandise you for power; they merchandise you for control. The false teachers are trying to figure out, “What do I need to tell these people in order to tickle their ears, in order to get them on board because I need their money, I need them for power, and I need them for control.” So, Peter identifies the false teachers make up whatever they need to, to merchandise the people, to pursue their own corrupt agenda.

...their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. (Vs. 3b)

Idle means basically a do-nothing, so essentially Peter is saying, “Don’t mistake the patience and mercy of God as if God is a do-nothing and God has fallen asleep on the job. Just because God has not zapped the false teachers dead today doesn’t mean He’s okay with it.” There is a judgment coming and people will be held accountable—accountable based not on people’s own relative standard, but on the absolute standard of righteousness of the character of God.

Arnie: Bryan, your message today was so relevant, but before we go any further, please define false teachers for me.

Bryan: Yeah, so anyone really teaching something contrary to what God has said. A lot of people think the false teachers in Peter's day were maybe early forms of Gnosticism. Maybe that's true. Maybe it's not, probably mostly religious teachers. So today they could be religious teachers, but actually it's any teacher that teaches something contrary to what God has said. It can be in the media, can be on the Internet, TV, books. I mean it's endless. And the number of false teachers is endless. We're bombarded every day with false messages.

Cara: Are you going to name names, or? [Yeah, where's that list?] [Laughter] [Well, only if I have to.] How do, I guess, how do we spot them?

Bryan: The only way to spot them is to know the truth [Right.] and the truth reveals the lies. I don't know any other way to do that.

Cara: Well, how are they "tickling ears" of people in our culture today then?

Bryan: Yeah. So "tickling the ears" is language Paul used. And basically, it's telling people what they want to hear. So that's kind of where we start the conversation. It's people telling people what they want to hear. So, things like minimizing sin, telling people, on the basis of their own good works. Maybe a message of prosperity more than obedience, false promises, [healing] healings. It's things that get attention. It's sensational. It gets money.

Cara: Do you think though that they actually believe it or that they want to believe it, or is it for personal gain?

Bryan: Yeah, that's a great question, kind of gets into assessing motives a little bit, but I do think a lot of these people start sincere. But I know as a preacher you figure out pretty quick what people want to hear, what fills up a building, what gets applause. Pretty soon it's easy to start catering to that and it gets money, it gets applause, sells books. So, it's easy to start drifting down that path. And it does often, too often, becomes about personal gain, which is just sad.

Arnie: But you know, it's complicated. Oftentimes we get hung up on doctrinal differences and that drives people crazy, but help us distinguish between those doctrinal differences and actual false teaching, or is there a difference?

Bryan: Yeah, so that's a really good question Arnie, because we wouldn't want listeners to think just because people have differences of opinion on theological issues, that they're false teachers. That's probably a bigger discussion than we can necessarily have here, but there's primary issues and maybe what we'd call secondary issues. Sometimes they put the primary issues in the category of the Person and work of Christ, the Deity of Christ, the Trinity, salvation by grace through faith, authority of Scripture. That's really different than differences of opinion on End Times, whether or not the charismatic gifts are still in play, church polity, women's role in the church. There are places where we disagree, but we're united on the fundamentals of the faith. False teaching would be something that's clearly outside the boundaries of Orthodox Christianity, of Biblical truth.

Cara: Would an example of that then be someone who paints Jesus as more of a social justice warrior and sort of fit the theology into that, as opposed to coming to save?

Bryan: I mean, I think it can be, it depends a little bit how people use the terms and what they mean by that. The Gospel penetrates everything, so then it's like, well, what do you mean by what you're saying? So, if people drift away from the core of the Gospel, of sin, of need of salvation, death, burial, resurrection of Christ, to a message of just social goodness, that would certainly be a problem, a big concern.

Cara: Do you think most of our listeners are likely to encounter one of these false teachers in a church, or some other way then?

Bryan: It's possible to encounter them in a church. It could be going to a church that isn't teaching the truth. I'm guessing most of our listeners are maybe a little bit more biblically savvy than that. It's

probably more likely to come through the media, through the Internet, through books, through radio, through seminars. You know, there's a lot of kind of "religious stuff" that's penetrated out into the business world, the marketplace. There's lots of places anymore that have spiritual overtones, where people can hear things that certainly aren't true.

Cara: If it's so big, we're not going to be able to stop it obviously. I mean, there's books being printed left and right, so what can we do about it though?

Bryan: Yeah. For the most part, know the truth. Be more discerning as to who we listen to and who we allow to speak into our lives. You know, we've talked about in Peter a life coach, so somebody speaking into your life, be pretty discerning who that might be. But I think it's also helpful to think through it in terms of your own vulnerabilities. Like what is the need that you're trying to satisfy? What is it that's missing? What is it for you personally that might make you vulnerable to the message of the false teacher? If you can identify your own points of weakness, I think it better equips you to walk in the truth.

Cara: Do we correct people that are falling prey to false teachers? Or do we just stay in our own lane? How do we do that?

Bryan: Well, I think it depends on what the situation is. For me as a pastor, if there's people in our body that are listening, paying attention to things that I think aren't true, part of my job would be to get involved and be part of that story. That's really different than a stranger that I don't have a relationship with. And can I speak into that or not? Depends on who it is and what the circumstance is.

Cara: I think a lot of people seem to say they're Christian, but then they create a theology that's fitting their morality.

Bryan: I think that happens all the time. So, the question is your starting place, you start with a desire to learn a correct theology, which then you'll adjust your morality accordingly. Or do you start with your morality and then try to find a theology that accommodates that. You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say, and if people's bent is to live a certain way, you can get on the Internet and find preachers that agree with you. So, [Even denominations.] yeah, absolutely.