

The importance of discernment * 2 Peter 2

May 21, 2023 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

One of the things that I appreciate about my mom is that she'll forward me emails that she thinks are a little fishy.

You know the ones from iTunes or Amazon or the CRA saying 'We've noticed some suspicious activity on your account and so you need to send us your username and password so we can check it out.'

You've gotten those emails too, right? Claiming to be from the CRA, saying that 'they've noticed suspicious activity in your account and now they need your username and password to check into it'? Two things I don't get about that – 1. If it's really the CRA, don't they already have that information? And 2. If you're going to go to the effort of setting up a phishing email, at the very least you should use spell check before you send it. I've seen an email from the 'CRA' that spelled Revenue wrong. It's beyond me.

And yet, people continue to fall for it. I swear, every week there's a news story on CBC about some new person who has lost thousands of dollars to an online scammer. When it comes to email and phone calls, you have to be careful. You have to be discerning in what you believe.

That's true in the secular world; sadly that's also true in the Church. There are people in the 'Capital C' Church who see the Christian faith as a way to make a buck or exercise power and so as followers of Jesus, we need to be discerning about who we trust. We need to carefully discern who we follow as we ultimately follow our Saviour Jesus.

And sadly again, this need for discernment is by no means a modern phenomenon. Even as the NT was being written, the Church was dealing with people who were in it for themselves and so this idea of false teachers is written right into our Bible. Turn with me to 2 Peter chapter 2 and we'll look at this issue with this question in mind – who can we trust to help us to follow Jesus? Ultimately, that's what this is all about – if we're going to deny ourselves, take up our Cross and follow Jesus, who can we trust to help us to do that?

2 Peter 2:1 starts in the middle of a thought; he has just been talking about true prophets in the Old Testament – how they were carried along by the Holy Spirit and so spoke God's Word (2 Peter 1:21) – and then he says:

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them-- bringing swift destruction on themselves. (2Pe 2:1 NIV).

Peter begins by laying it all out – there will be false teachers in the Church. Peter doesn't want to sugar coat it or underplay the issue here. Peter is making it abundantly clear that we need to be aware of the possibility of untrustworthy teachers creeping into the Church.

And in the rest of this passage, Peter shows us what these false teachers are like. And while I could unpack this passage one verse at a time, I think it makes more sense to highlight three themes that Peter comes back to again and again. He has a lot to say, but really they revolve around three big ideas

that Peter keeps coming back to. Those ideas, those things that Peter wants us to know about false teachers are:

1. Their sin.
2. Their effect.
3. Their fate.

In this passage, Peter tells us about the sin of false teachers, the effect of false and the fate of false teachers so I'll unpack those one at a time.

So first, the sin of false teachers.

There are actually two issues here - what they believe and how they act – and we've already seen the first one.

Verse 1 again - They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them.

This is one aspect of the sin of false teachers – false doctrine or bad belief. False teachers have a habit of introducing new ideas into the Christian faith, ideas that are not rooted in the Word of God. Unlike Peter who 'did not entice his people with made up stories' (remember in chapter 1 he says that?), verse 3, Peter says: "In their greed, these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up."

False teachers tend to overemphasize certain parts of the Bible or just pay little attention to the Bible at all in order to bring their own ideas into the Church. Just at the end of April, thirty nine bodies were dug up in Kenya, followers of a teacher who told his people to starve themselves to death in order to meet Jesus.¹ I would love to know what exactly he was saying that convinced these people to starve themselves to death but let me assure you, nowhere in the Bible does it say that starvation is salvation. That is a destructive heresy that this guy introduced into the church.

But it doesn't have to be an obviously out there idea that people bring into the church. False teachers can bring all sorts of ideas into the Church, like denying Jesus' divinity, excluding certain parts of the Bible, and claiming that God speaks directly to them with the same authority as Scripture. Anything that goes beyond what God has described in His Word has the potential for heresy and so we need to be careful about what our teachers believe.

So that's one aspect of the sin of false teachers – what they believe – another aspect is what they do.

This I think is nicely summarized in verse 10 – 'they follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature.' These guys claim that they have been saved by the grace of God and delivered from the corruption of the world, but in reality, verse 19: they are slaves of depravity, having been mastered by their sinful nature. Their sin may not be what they believe but what they do. And boy, Peter doesn't hold back on the many things that false teachers may go:

Verse 3 – you've got greed, verse 14 – they're 'experts' in greed; they're in it for the money. Now the old joke at this point is 'ha, ha, who would be in ministry for the money when the pay is not glamorous' but there are some people who make millions in ministry. Do you remember five years ago there was a

televangelist who asked his people to give money so that he could buy a fourth \$54 million jet for his ministry. False teachers can be experts in greed.

verse 10 – you’ve got arrogance and pride; people who are more interested in building their own platform rather than promoting Jesus.

Verse 13, verse 14, verse 18 – you’ve got people in it for pleasure and adultery.

Verse 14: 14 With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; (2Pe 2:14 NIV).

Verse 18: 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. (2Pe 2:18 NIV).

This I think is one of the most tragic things about false teachers. They abuse the power and influence they have as teachers for their own pleasure, taking advantage of the people that they are supposed to care for.

Verse 19 says it well - 19 They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity--for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him. (2Pe 2:19 NIV).

That’s the sin of false teachers – in some cases what they believe and in some cases what they do.

And their effect is all too real. Verse 2: Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. (2Pe 2:2 NIV). No wonder people think ill of the church when they see headlines about sex scandals and death cults.

And verse 18 again - they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. (2Pe 2:18 NIV). Christian leaders are supposed to HELP people to escape from the corruption of the world and here you have these false teachers leading people back into it!

This is the effect of false teachers: they lead people astray and make Jesus look bad. But you know what? They’ll get theirs. Because Peter keeps coming back again and again to their fate.

Verse 1 – They are ‘bringing swift destruction on themselves.’

Verse 3 - Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. (2Pe 2:3 NIV).

Verse 13 - They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done. (2Pe 2:13 NIV).

Verse 17: 17 These men are springs without water [ie. useless] and mists driven by a storm [that is, inconsequential]. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. (2Pe 2:17 NIV).

They may think they’ve got it all figured out and they’re ‘living the life,’ but Peter makes it clear: they’ll get theirs. Their fate is sealed and it is not pleasant.

So those are the main ideas about false teachers that Peter wants us to know – their sins (both what they believe and what they do), their effect (to fool people and bring shame on the truth) and their fate (swift destruction, condemnation, they’ll be paid back for every wrong).

Now what do we do with this information? I want to be careful because I don't think it's wise to throw the label 'false teacher' around willy-nilly. That's a big accusation. And I think that some of the people who get called 'false teachers' online are really just people whose orthodox theology doesn't line up with the theology of the person calling them out.

But I do think it's important to be discerning in who we listen to as believers. In a world where anyone with a microphone and an internet connection can become the next big thing, we need to be careful about who we allow to influence our faith. I know that some of you will tune in to other churches when you can't be here or listen in to TV preaching. When you be, be discerning.

And in the interest of helping you with that, I would say – be careful with any of the health and wealth teachers who are out there saying 'just believe and God will give you riches.' Be careful with any of the Christian nationalist guys who equate allegiance to their nation with allegiance to Jesus. Be careful with anyone who wants you to put them or anything else before following Jesus the way the Bible talks about following Jesus and being His disciple.

This is why knowing your Bible is so important. That way you can test their teachings and say 'does what they're saying line up with what God says in His Word?' You can make one verse say just about anything, but does what this person is saying line up with what the rest of what Scripture says about that same thing?

And to be completely honest, I think that in our day and age, the false teachers that we need to be careful about aren't even IN the church. There's a part of me (when I was writing this sermon) that said 'nobody's going to fall for any of this; we could pick up a false teacher a mile away.' But are we just as discerning when it comes to voices OUTSIDE the Church? Just last week I was reading an article in Wired called 'Why the US is primed for radicalization'ⁱⁱ and I think it could be easy for Canada to go the same way.

Secular leaders can be just as guilty of leading us astray, leading us to value earthly things more than heavenly ones. I mean, if they're not believers, they've already done the big thing that Peter named right off the top – denying the sovereign Lord who bought them – so we need to be careful about the influence that we allow them to have in our lives. This could be influencers, authors, political movements; we need to be just as careful discerning *their* teachings as we do the teachers in the Church.

So if that's 'who NOT to follow', who *should* you trust? Who can you trust? This is the thing that I wrestled with as I pulled this together. Peter says 'beware of false prophets' but he doesn't say anything about 'trustworthy teachers.' And so to complete the message I think we need to say this:

Follow the leaders whose teaching and life show that they are following Jesus.
Follow the leaders who are following Jesus.

Let me unpack that – follow the leaders whose teaching shows that they are following Jesus.

Absolutely, you need to be discerning about who you trust, but if you've got a leader whose teaching lines up with that of Jesus' teaching, then that person is worth listening to. I'm constantly working to make sure my doctrine is accurate; I'm constantly asking myself as I prepare my sermons 'would Jesus agree with this if He was sitting in the pews?' If you have teachers that you listen to who are biblically

accurate and theologically faithful, then they are worth listening to, worth letting them influence your life and faith and motivate your life and faith.

So follow the leaders whose teaching shows that they are following Jesus.

But also follow the leaders who practice what they preach. Follow the leaders whose life shows that they are following Jesus.

If you've got somebody who says one thing and does another, you've got a problem on your hands. You want a teacher who doesn't just talk the talk but walks the walk too.

This is what's so frustrating when you hear about preachers who have faithfully taught from the pulpit but then it turns out that they were having an affair or embezzling money. Before I get up here, the Scripture that I'm preaching on has to work in my heart, has to impact and shape me, before I even think about sharing it with you. Look for people of integrity whose inner life shows that they are paying attention to their own teaching!

Douglas Moo puts it like this: "But when we are faced with a teaching that we are not sure about and that we are having a hard time judging against the standard of Scripture, a careful look at the lifestyle of those who propose such teaching will often prove helpful. Do they teach with humility and love? Do they give evidence of seeking to submit all their conduct to the Lordship of Christ? Do they pray with fervor and sincerity? These are the kind of questions that Scripture encourages us to ask of those who would teach us."ⁱⁱⁱ

Follow the leaders whose *teaching and life* show that they are following Jesus.

And if I may, I'll take that a step further and say – 'follow the leaders who lead you to Jesus.'

Ultimately, I think that the false teachers that Peter describes in his letter, the ones who bring a bad name to the Church today – the one thing that they have in common is that they're in it for themselves. Consciously or not, ministry is a way for them to gain power or influence or money or pleasure and yet what does Jesus say to EVERY believer:

Deny yourself, take up your Cross, follow HIM.

Not Graham Gladstone. My goal is to lead you to Jesus and I hope that you're feeling that that's what I'm doing.

Because what's absolutely crucial is to follow the leaders who lead you to Jesus.

ⁱ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65423645>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.wired.com/story/radicalization-extremism-us-uncertainty-social-media/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Moo, Douglas J.. 2 Peter, Jude (The NIV Application Commentary Book 18). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.