FALSE TEACHERS AND THEIR DESTRUCTION

2 Peter 2:1–22

Key Verse: 2:9

“…if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.”

Have you ever asked yourself, “What difference does it make?” When we struggle to do good and nothing good ever seems to come of it, we feel like giving up. We even can give in to despair, or start thinking that doing bad won’t matter, either. Today’s passage describes false teachers and their destruction. It can seem like an extreme case, and their false teaching might seem obscure. But in light of this entire letter, it’s basically the teaching that there won’t ever be a judgment day. And this idea isn’t rare; it’s a main attitude and lifestyle in our world today. People live as if God were not there and that there won’t ever be a judgment day. It’s a huge mistake. In a corrupt world rebelling against God, Peter urges Christians to live a godly life, believing that God is watching, and that God will surely deal with both the righteous and the wicked someday. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Read verse 1a. Peter has just mentioned prophets at the end of chapter 1. They didn’t make up their prophecies with their own interpretations or will; they “spoke from God, carried along by the Holy Spirit.” But, Peter says, there were also false prophets among the people. He’s referring to the history of Israel in the Old Testament. There were so many stories of false prophets, and they all were similar in some ways. False prophets mainly told God’s people that God wouldn’t punish them for their sin. They promised peace and prosperity when God was actually warning the complete opposite. God’s true servants told the people not to listen to them, because it would lead to destruction. Here Peter predicts the same thing would continue to happen in Christian communities. Our Lord Jesus himself told us to watch out for false prophets (Mt7:15; 24:11,24), as did Apostle Paul and Apostle John (1Ti1:3; 1Jn4:1). We would like our Christian community to be a safe haven, with only people whom we can trust, but the devil is always working to spoil such a place. We need to be spiritually alert.

What do false teachers do? Read verse 1b. “Destructive heresies” are basically false teachings. Today there are all kinds of teachings, and people are entitled to their opinions, no matter how extreme. Society tells us to tolerate everything. But we should know that there are certain teachings that are destructive. Sometimes the destructiveness can be seen right way; other times, the effect takes longer to discover. Today people teach about climate change or diet or race or even morality in extremely polarizing ways, and it’s not always easy to see what effect these teachings will have. But Peter isn’t talking about general teachings; in using the word “heresies” he’s specifically talking about religious truths. Heresies are religious truths slightly twisted to teach something different. For example, we should work hard and try to do what is right because God is watching. But the gospel truth is that only Jesus’ grace can save us, and we need to learn to depend on his grace, not on ourselves. With so many kinds of religious truths out there, it’s easy to get confused.

What destructive heresy might Peter be thinking of? Fundamentally it’s people “who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality” (Jude 4). Yes, God showers his amazing grace on us in Jesus, who died for our sins. But God’s grace doesn’t give us permission to just sin freely. 1 Peter 2:24a says, “‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness…” Titus 2:11–14 says, “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” If we sin in the name of Jesus’ grace, we’re abusing his grace.

Here in verse 1b Peter says that those who teach such heresies are “even denying the Sovereign Lord who bought them.” Jesus is our Sovereign Lord, meaning our Master. He “bought” us at the cost of his precious blood. He bought us so that now we belong to him, not to ourselves (2Co5:15). So we should live with him as our Lord and Master, live to please him, not to please our sinful nature. Since Jesus bought us at the high cost of his shed blood, we should strive to honor him with our bodies (1Co6:20). Peter teaches us that God’s grace should lead us to godly living, for Jesus’ name’s sake, and godly living starts with what we do with our bodies. This is the unchanging gospel truth for all people of all time, and it’s not destructive, but very healthy.

But it’s not a popular teaching. It’s so much easier to use grace as an excuse to sin. So Peter warns us. Read verse 2. When people, who say they are Christians, try to claim God’s grace only so that they can continue in their depraved conduct, they “bring the way of truth into disrepute.” What is “the way of truth”? In verse 15 Peter mentions “the straight way,” and in verse 21 he mentions “the way of righteousness.” He’s talking about a true Christian life. It’s a life of following Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life (Jn14:6). It’s a godly way of life. When we don’t actually live this way, when don’t practice what we preach, when we give in to our own sins, we become hypocrites. And our hypocrisy isn’t just our personal problem; Peter says it dishonors Christianity itself (cf. Ro2:17–24). Though it may not seem so, people are watching us.

Then Peter brings it back to the false teachers. Read verse 3a. Peter has been pointing out the traits of false teachers. They teach heresies. They have “depraved conduct.” Here, they are greedy. They make up stories to exploit people out of their money. Peter mentions these things to help us watch out for false teachers in any place or generation. They seem to be getting away with it, but Peter is sure that God is going to hold them accountable (3b).

How can Peter be so sure? We live in a world where people often don’t get caught for the bad things they’ve done. Some openly try to justify the things that God clearly calls sin. Those who struggle to do right look like they’re missing out on all the fun. To help us believe God’s judgment is real, Peter reviews three examples. Read verses 4–8. First, God didn’t spare even angels when they sinned against him. Though they were his beloved creatures God sent those angels to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgment. They became the devil and his demons (cf. Jude 6; Rev12:7–9). Second, God didn’t spare the ancient world, though he created it very good; he brought a flood on its ungodly people that destroyed all life on earth (Ge7:21–23). At the same time God protected Noah and his family because Noah lived a godly life. Third, God condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes (Ge19: 24,25,28). Their people were so lawless that Lot who lived there was distressed and tormented day after day by what he saw and heard. At the time like God’s judgment didn’t seem real, but when the burning sulfur started landing on people’s heads, it was very real. These examples point to the final judgment day.

Read verse 9. We learn from this that God is always watching. It may seem like he’s not there, but God is still there. And God knows exactly what to do with people. God knows how to rescue the godly from trials. It’s a great comfort. It tells us to really trust him. In this world we face all kinds of trials—especially the trial of living among ungodly people, who live as if God were not there. It can be so lonely to struggle to live a godly life. It can even seem overwhelming, when people’s influences all around us are just the opposite. But we need to keep trusting God who knows how to rescue us.

God also knows how to hold “the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment.” It means God is holding each person accountable. He doesn’t punish right way; he’s waiting for the day of judgment. It’s a very important truth about God. God is the God of grace and salvation, but he’s also the God of judgment. Without his justice, his grace would have no meaning. But we should not just be hoping that God will punish all the wicked on the day of judgment. We need to know that God is holding not only non-believers, but also believers accountable for the way we live. 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (cf. 1Pe4:17). This gospel truth should inspire us to live a holy, godly life, and to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him (3:11,14).

Peter goes on to describe more about these false teachers. It’s not about the future, but about the present—meaning it’s already been happening. In verse 10 he says they “follow the corrupt desire of the flesh.” In verse 13 he says they are “reveling in their pleasures,” and in verse 14 he says their eyes are “full of adultery.” In verse 18 he says they appeal “to the lustful desires of the flesh.” In verse 19 he says they are “slaves of depravity.” He’s mainly talking about sexual sin. But it isn’t just their private sin. In verse 14 he says “they seduce the unstable,” and in verse 18 he says “they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.” They are very sick people who make others sick also. In verse 13a Peter says, “They will be paid back with harm for the harm they have done.” Leading anyone, including new Christians, into sexual sin causes great harm, and God will not fail to punish those who do it.

Peter, out of his shepherd’s heart to protect God’s people, points out some other traits of false teachers. In verse 14 he mentions their greed a second time (3a) and adds that “they are experts” in it, meaning they practice it daily, like going to the gym. In verses 15,16 he compares false teachers to the prophet Balaam, who got sidetracked by his own greedy desires that made him like a madman, and God used even his donkey to rebuke him. In verse 10 Peter also says false teachers are “bold and arrogant” and “despise authority.” In verse 12 he says they “blaspheme in matters they do not understand.” In verse 18 he says they “mouth empty, boastful words.” It shows how proud they really are. They have no fear of God. Lustful, greedy, proud…these are not good traits for anyone, not to mention those trying to teach others. In verse 17 Peter says they are “springs without water and mists driven by a storm.” In a dry climate, water from a spring or mist is cherished. Likewise, in a spiritually dry world people go to teachers to have their spiritual thirst quenched. But false teachers leave people sorely disappointed and troubled. Finally, in verses 20–22 Peter says these false teachers have backslidden into their old sins, and he compares them to a dog or a pig. It’s not just a funny description but a warning: we all need not just outward, cosmetic change; our inner nature needs to be really changed by the gospel.

Read verse 9 again. In this unbelieving world may God help us to really believe in him and believe his day of judgment is real. May he give us keen spiritual discernment about false teachers. And may his grace help us struggle to live godly lives before him that are a good influence on those around us.