

Sermon 6th September 2009 (2nd Peter 2:1-22) “False teachers”

“false, deceptive, irrational, slanderous, blots, blemishes, greedy, accursed, full of bombastic nonsense, slaves of corruption, vomit-eating-dogs.”

This is pretty strong language, and I suspect it leaves many of us quite uncomfortable.

I really do wonder how to preach on this chapter, without sounding like I’m foaming at the mouth, and wanting to denounce every liberal preacher and unbiblical teaching imaginable.

It seems to cut right against the cultural grain of our times, and we want to say:

“Hold on Peter. Whatever happened to tolerance?

You know: diversity of opinion, Peter?

Just because you don’t agree with them!

Maybe they have a point. Who’s to say?

Surely, Jesus wouldn’t want his apostle sounding like a religious bigot?

There’s really no call for this violent rhetoric.

It can’t really be worth fighting over, can it?”

Well, here’s the thing.

I’m not a violent person.

I was never one to beat people up at school, and I don’t like shouting. I’d rather get along with people, and avoid a fight.

However.

If anyone ever physically threatened my children,

I’d become extremely violent, extremely quickly.

I’m also not vindictive.

I believe criminals should be rehabilitated.

I believe in compassion, mercy and second chances.

But if any criminal ever threatened my family,

there would be no second chances,

and the only compassion would be a baseball bat to the side of the head.

And parents, you know exactly what I mean.

And that explains where this chapter comes from.

It comes from the heart.

The apostle cares about the young Christians.

He is their pastor, they are his children.

He taught them.

He watched they grow.

He encouraged their faith.

He picked them up when they fell.

His very heart is to see them grow in Jesus:

to see them live lives that glorify God;

to see them know the truth and to reach all the potential that God has for them,

until that day, when Jesus will say “well done”

But, there are other teachers,

and they’ve come among his children speeding false ideas

– ideas that didn’t come from Jesus:

undermining their faith

tempting them back into the pagan lifestyles out of which they’ve come.

These teachers may have been nice people but their false teachings are corrupting and corroding the life of the sheep.

So, metaphorically, the pastor takes a theological baseball bat to the side of their heads.

He will protect his children.

There is much to talk about in the church today:

Much to debate – much to discuss.

But there is also a time to say “no”.

“This is false, this is dangerous, and this will lead the sheep astray.”

Jesus said to Peter, “Feed my sheep”.

Pastoral care is to be a shepherd,

and the shepherd must *always* be gentle with the sheep

but he must also be ferocious with the wolves.

We are pastors of the flock,

we are elders of the people of God

we are parents of the children

and we will defend them.

2v1 *“there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions”*

Right from the beginning there were false doctrines among the Christians.

The Greek word for opinions here is “heresies” – destructive heresies.

Heresies are teachings about God, or about Jesus, which are not what the apostles taught.

If anyone claims to be a Christian but says that Jesus is not God – he is a heretic.

If anyone claims to be a Christian and says Jesus is not human – he is a heretic.

If any Christian denies the sinless life, the death, the Resurrection, the ascension, or the coming again of Jesus – he is a heretic.

And it matters.

Because, as we have already seen in this letter this theology matters.

This good news about Jesus is the good news that sets us free,

because Jesus died for us, took our sins and gave us his righteousness,

but it is also the good news that calls us to obedience

to live our whole lives growing in Christ – empowered by the Spirit.

And, as we saw last week, all this rests on what the apostles proclaimed about Jesus.

On what those who were there, and learned from the master, testified is true.

But the false teachers chip away at all of that.

In the case of this letter, what they were saying is this:

“We don’t believe that Jesus is coming back to judge the world.

We know that the apostles taught that, but they were wrong.

We’ve moved on. We are more sophisticated.

We don’t need to believe that Jesus will return,

and as for coming back to judge? Well?

God’s not going to judge people.

God’s not going to get angry at us.

God loves people. It’s OK.

Nobody is going to hell. God doesn’t really get angry at sin”

And the problem with that wrong thinking is that it leads to a wrong conclusion.

If there is no judge, then you can do as you please.

If God isn't bothered how you live, then you can live as you want.

If God is going to affirm you as you are, then you don't need to change, and you don't need to repent, you can just go on living the way you are, and God will smile on you.

You can be like everyone else, and God won't mind.

And so the false teaching, leads to false living.

And that's why Peter associates the false teachers with greed and sexual immorality, because their false gospel simply encourages people to go on living like the rest of the greedy immoral society they live in.

So, how are these false teachers to be recognised?

Well, this chapter gives us four critical marks.

Firstly, they innovate.

2:1a *"they secretly bring in destructive opinions"*

Now we said last week, that we need to differentiate between that which comes from Jesus, was taught by the apostles, and is witnessed to by the Scriptures, from ideas that are simply made up by a preacher.

We should ask: "what is the authority for that idea?" "Where does it come from?"

Peter wrote in 1:16 "we did not follow cleverly devised myths"

and then he goes on to remind us that the apostles were there,

they saw what Jesus did

they heard what Jesus taught

and they passed it to us.

So, modern trendy ideas might appeal – but they don't come from Jesus – so even if we like them, why should we think they are true?

Second, they deny the Lordship of Christ

2:1b *"they will even deny the Master who bought them"*

The idea here is that Jesus has paid for us on the cross.

Our lives therefore, belong to him.

He is the Master, who bought us.

Paul puts it this way

"You are not your own. You were bought at a price: therefore glorify God in your body."

But, so much that passes for religion today says:

"yes, I am my own." "I can do what I want" "I can make up my mind how to live"

"I am my own Master"

And instead of being a call to repent of my pride, and surrender my life to God

it is a call that says "I am alright" "I am doing just fine"

There is a tendency in a lot of modern religion to tell people that all they need to do is to believe in themselves, and to raise their self-esteem.

And what the Church needs to do is to affirm people just as they are.

But the true call of the gospel is to call people to repent,

and to know that they are broken

and to believe in Jesus
and to surrender themselves to the Master's will.

These false teachers live lose.
Their lives are not godly.
They indulge their passions and their lusts and their greed.
And in their words and in their deeds, they are encouraging others to do the same.

And it is dangerous,
because these Christians are new converts.
They have come out of paganism,
with all its immorality and drunkenness and idolatry,
and as we have seen, the true teacher says: now that you have received this new life in
Christ, and have been given everything you need for life and godliness, make every
effort to add

(1:5) ... *goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance godliness and love* .
And the false teacher says, in word and in example– “nah, don't bother”.

Thirdly, the false teachers are popular.

2:2 “*many will follow their licentious ways*”

That is, many people will prefer teaching that gives them licence to do what they want.
It is always very tempting to tell people what they want to hear.

I often look at passages and think: I know what that means and it is hard.
Can I really say that to people?
Can I really challenge them on that?

If I speak about giving, some people will squirm – that's not a great way of keeping
them coming.
If I speak about sex and relationships – there will be some people whose lives are not
straightforward in that area, will I chase them away?
If I speak about prayer, or need for regular church attendance, or Bible study, will I
just make people feel guilty?

And the temptation is to peddle back, to make the message more palatable or more
popular.

I was involved in a discussion about Christian views of marriage recently
and we noted how far society had moved from a Christian ideal:
how small a percentage of people would be virgins on their wedding nights.
And the question – can we still teach what we've always taught?
It isn't popular. It isn't going to attract big crowds.

It is interesting that Peter speaks in this chapter about Balaam.
Do you know the story of Baalam?

It is in the book of Numbers.
Baalam was a prophet for hire.
He liked to be popular.
For a nice pulpit supply fee, Baalam would pitch up and tell you whatever you wanted
to hear.

Baalam eventually gets hired by Balak King of Moab, and enemy of Israel, and he is
paid to go and prophesy against the Israelites.
He's about to do it when God makes his donkey rebuke him,
and the donkey preaches to the prophet and says “you are not speaking for God.”

It is a brilliant story.

It is a lesson in humility for any preacher.

God can use a donkey in a pulpit and it can be better than me.

You know you're off beam when your animals start rebuking you.

And then a fourth thing about false teaching – it rejects authority. (2:10)

As we said last week it is not for the preacher to decide what truth is.

It is for the preacher to pass on the message that Jesus gave to the apostles.

Jesus said “all *authority* on heaven and earth has been given to me – (Matthew 28:19) go therefore and make disciples teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”

Jesus has authority to teach, and he gives that authority to the Church – to teach his commandments.

But false teachers hate authority.

You can say “Scripture says this”

they reply “I don't care – we are modern, we know better.”

You can say “The Church has always taught this for 2,000 years.”

They reply “I don't care; we decided last year that that's no good.”

You can say “you just made that up, no-one said that before.”

They reply “I don't care, they are all wrong, I'm right, live with it”

Do not despise authority.

Do not think you always know best.

Do not be that confident of your own wisdom.

False teaching starts with pride:

a pride that stops us submitting to God's word – and wants us to judge it.

False teaching starts when we don't come to the Church to learn but to lecture.

Now, of course, questioning is good.

Honestly sharing our doubts and struggles is something we want to encourage.

But we need question with humility:

“I don't understand – help me”

“I find this bit of Scripture difficult – Lord open my eyes”

“I'm struggling to make sense of this – work with me”

“Because maybe, just maybe, I've got this wrong.”

The false teachers said “there is no judgement.”

“God will not act against sin.”

“God does not get angry.”

“God will not punish anyone.”

Peter effectively says, “Well, that's nice maybe, but you just made that up”

“That's simply not what Jesus taught the apostles about God.

That's also not what the Old Testament prophets say.”

“If you want to know what God is like – let's look at the Bible together.”

“Because we don't worship the God you made up yesterday, we worship the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

We worship the God of Israel. We worship the God of Jesus Christ: the same yesterday, today, and forever. That's our authority.”

And so he does two Bible studies with them.

The first is from Noah.

What does the story of Noah teach about God?

God rescues people and God promises future mercy
but it is against a backdrop of a God who grieves over sin
– and is ready to punish it in quite dreadful ways.

And it must have been tough for Noah.

Imagine it. When we are among friends who are not Christians, we often want to keep our religion low profile.

“I’ll speak about it if I must, but please don’t ask.” “I just want no-one to ask.”

But Noah? He’s building the QE2 in the middle of the desert, because he heard God telling him to.

No one can miss what Noah’s doing; no one can fail to ask why.

All his friends know about his religion, and all think he’s a nut.

You can bet his kids get laughed at at school.

Being faithful to God cost Noah.

The false teachers say “you don’t need to change” “you don’t need to be different”
“your lifestyle doesn’t need to stick out.”

But Noah builds a 100ft boat in the middle of a desert.

For Noah to be rescued means his life is going to be very very different from those around him – and it will be a lot of work.

The second Bible study is the story of Lot.

Lot lived in the most debauched, immoral, perverse and violent society you can imagine – city of Sodom.

And Lot was far from perfect himself.

And God judged Sodom and rescued Lot.

But Lot, who was far from perfect, was, says Peter “tormented in his righteous soul, by their lawless deeds that he saw and heard,”

Lot was not going to fit in with the cultural lifestyle of Sodom. Lot was different.

Lot was rescued, because Lot refused to fit in.

What’s Peter’s point?

Firstly, the Bible speaks of a God who does act against sin.

God’s got form on this.

He flooded the world in the days of Noah, and he destroyed Sodom.

So when Jesus said that God will someday judge the earth – just as the prophets said – you should take it seriously.

Because that’s the God of the Bible,
that’s the God of the Christian faith,
that’s the God Jesus Christ,
and not the one someone made up yesterday.

And secondly that God is doing a wonderful thing.

He is rescuing us and delivering us from the corruption around us,

he is saving us in Jesus Christ,

but with that rescuing comes a call to live a way different from this world around us:
to live in a godly way.

That's the good news. And it is here to transform your life that you might be rescued and become something very different.

It is not a gospel that affirms you as you are and tells you everything is OK.

It is not a gospel that says that the material, sexual, the cultural, the godless values of society are just fine.

It is not a gospel that will adapt to whatever ethical codes modern people will decide are OK.

And as ministers, and elders and teachers,
as parents and mature Christians,

we need to be in the business to helping people live this type of life, and resisting with all our power the type of "I'm OK, you're OK, we don't need to change" theology, that affirms everything and challenges no one to repent and change.

Peter says that this teaching is like a "waterless spring" (2:17) – it does not deliver.

So in verse 20-22 he warns that what it does is that takes people who have become Christians and started to live a godly life, different from the world about them, and encourages them simply to go back to being what they once were.

Like pigs, they got cleaned up, and then went back to rolling in the mud.

How many people do you know who once made a commitment to Christ,
they even started living for him,

they began to change, to be noticeably different from those about them
and then, they went back

someone told them it was OK, OK to dabble a bit in things that weren't that godly
in the wrong relationships

in doing other things on an odd Sunday, and skipping worship.

"It's OK, God won't really mind"

"the world isn't that bad"

"Christians don't need to be that different"

"God doesn't demand that much"

"There's no need to sacrifice what you enjoy"

and soon, they are going spiritually nowhere.

We must fight this teaching.

We must defend against it.

We must protect this flock.

A few years ago sharks started coming in very close to the beaches of Sydney, Australia. So, the authorities put up notices; "Beware of the sharks", which had a picture of a gruesome shark with vicious pointed teeth.

One mother seeing these signs complained that they were frightening her children as they played on the beach & paddled in the water & she asked if the signs could be made less scary. She had missed the point - these notices were *meant* to be scary.

And this chapter is meant to be scary too.

So let us heed the warning, and stay true to what we have learned from the apostles.

Making every effort to live our lives based on the truth we have been taught, and avoiding the danger of the voices that call for us to make life easier.

Amen.