

There were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. (2 Peter 2:1; NIV)

2 Peter 1 is all good: In Christ you have everything you need to live and be effective and productive in the Christian life (v8). More than that, he is able to provide everything you need to receive a rich welcome in the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

You might wish that the book ended there, but it doesn't! Alongside truth there is error. Close to the genuine you will find the counterfeit. Mixed with the wheat you will find the weeds. Outside of heaven there is hell.

The whole counsel of God

2 Peter 2 is all about counterfeit Christianity. We are committed to the expository preaching of the Bible, which means that our normal diet in this church is to work through Bible books. There are some weeks when I am tempted to wish it was not so. I want you to know that I don't come to this subject today with any relish.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones says:

Of all the chapters which are to be found in the entire Bible, this second chapter of the second epistle of Peter is among the most terrible... Anyone who enjoys reading a chapter like this must surely be abnormal.¹

It's easy to understand why many churches take a channel-hopping approach to the Bible. I do this with the television. It's a guy thing. You sit on the sofa and you think, "Now, what's on that I want to see?" You have the remote in your hand. You watch for a few minutes, and then you flip over to another channel.

That's fine with television, but it's not good when it comes to the Bible. If we jump around the Bible choosing only the bits we want to hear, switching off when something doesn't immediately catch our interest, we will miss things God is saying that we desperately need to hear.

If you take a channel-hopping approach to the Bible, your faith will be lacking. You will not have everything you need for life because you are not hearing everything Christ has to say to you. You will be a malnourished Christian. A person who is malnourished is weak. He has no energy. He cannot resist infection. That's not where you want to be. Don't live on devotionals that jump around the Bible. You need to get the substance of the Bible into the marrow of your soul.

¹ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Expository Sermons on 2 Peter* (Edinburg: Banner of Truth, 1999), p.123 and 134.

A church that picks from the Bible the things that people want to hear will only produce weak Christians. We all want to be affirmed. But Christians who live on that diet alone cannot develop the spiritual marrow and muscle that is needed for a healthy Christian life.

If this church took a channel-hopping approach to the Bible, you would not be hearing a sermon on 2 Peter 2. I'm taking the view that if the Holy Spirit moved Peter to spend one third of his last letter to the church on the subject of counterfeit Christianity then this must be something that we need to hear.

False teachers in the church

There were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you (v1).

There are no "ifs, ands, or buts" here. It's a clear and definite statement. There *were* false prophets among the people (of Israel in the Old Testament). That's a matter of history.

False prophets were a constant problem in the Old Testament, and those who falsely claimed to be prophets of God were to be stoned. The people rarely had the will to deal with them, and so they multiplied, causing disaster to the spiritual life of God's people.

In the same way Peter says, "There *will be* false teachers among you" (v1). Notice the words "among you." Peter is writing to the church and he says, "There will be false prophets *among you.*" So he is not talking about new age people on television. He is talking about people in the local church, members of a local congregation.

There is no such thing as a pure church this side of heaven. You will never find it. The wheat and the tares grow together. Warren Wiersbe writes:

Satan is the counterfeiter... He has a false gospel (Gal. 1:6-9), preached by false ministers (2 Cor. 11:13-12), producing false Christians (2 Cor. 11:26)... Satan plants his counterfeits wherever God plants true believers (Matt. 13:38).²

How would you recognize counterfeit Christianity?

Seven General Characteristics

2 Peter 1 describes genuine believers. 2 Peter 2 describes counterfeit believers. If you put these chapters side by side you will see the difference between authentic and counterfeit believers.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Be Alert* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1984), p.72.

1. Different Source—Where does the message come from?

Peter says, “We did not follow *cleverly invented stories* when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:16). And then he says the false teachers exploit you “with stories they have made up” (2:3). So, the true teacher sources what he says from the Bible, the false teacher relies on his own creativity. He makes up his own message.

2. Different Message—What is the substance of the message?

For the true teacher, Jesus Christ is central. “We have everything we need for life and godliness in him” (1:3). For the false teacher, Jesus is at the margins: “They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them” (2:1).

Notice the word “secretly.” It’s very rare for someone in church to openly deny Jesus. Movement away from the centrality of Christ is subtle. The false teacher will speak about how other people can help you change your life, but if you listen carefully to what he is saying, you will see that Jesus Christ is not essential to his message.

3. Different Position—In what position will the message leave you?

The true Christian: “Escapes the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (1:4). Listen to how Peter describes the counterfeit Christian: “They promise... freedom, while they themselves are *slaves of depravity*, for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2:19). Two very different dynamics are at work here: The true believer is escaping corruption, while the counterfeit believer is mastered by it.

4. Different Character—What kind of people does the message produce?

The true believer pursues: goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love (1:5). The counterfeit Christian is marked by arrogance and slander (2:10). They are “experts in greed,” and “their eyes are full of adultery” (v14). They also “despise authority” (v10). This is a general characteristic of a counterfeit believer.

5. Different Appeal—Why should you listen to the message?

The true teacher appeals to Scripture. “We have the word of the prophets made more certain and you will do well to pay attention to it” (1:19). God has spoken, and the true teacher appeals to his Word.

The false teacher makes a very different appeal: “By appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error” (2:18). So, the true teacher asks, “What has God said in his Word?” The false teacher asks, “What do people want to hear? What will appeal to their flesh?”

6. Different Fruit—What result does the message have in people’s lives?

The true believer is effective and productive in his or her knowledge of Jesus Christ (1:8). The counterfeit is “like a spring without water” (2:17). This is an extraordinary picture! They promise much but produce little.

7. Different End—Where does the message ultimately lead you?

Here we find the most disturbing contrast of all. The true believer will receive “a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:11). The false believer will experience “swift destruction” (2:1). “Their condemnation has long been hanging over them and their destruction has not been sleeping” (2:3).

Jesus tells us that there will be *many* who have been involved in ministry in his name, to whom he will say, “Depart from me; I never knew you” (Matt. 7:21). Who are these people? Surely Peter is describing them right here.

Don't be naïve

There will be false teachers among you (v1).

Two applications before we move on. First, Peter's plain statement reminds us that the church needs to be protected. Among the many wonderful people who come through the doors of the church each year, there will be some who would do the church more harm than good.

They may seem the nicest of people, but they do not believe in the authority of the Bible or the exclusivity of salvation in Christ. We must welcome such people, because they need Christ as much as we do, but we must not allow them to have influence in the church.

Second, skeptics will always be able to point to hypocrisy and inconsistency in the church. They've always done it, and they always will. One of the strangest reasons for not following Christ goes like this: “I've seen people in the church who are hypocrites.” You will not follow Christ because some people who claim to do so are hypocrites.

The existence of the counterfeit is never a good reason for rejecting the genuine. Peter says, “Of course there are counterfeit Christians. Of course there are teachers who do the church more harm than good. What else would you expect in this fallen world? Grow up! Don't be naïve! Don't miss what's real simply because you have seen the counterfeit. You might be able to make a case this week to someone who's hiding behind this excuse!”

One Distinguishing Mark

The existence of counterfeit Christianity raises one obvious question: How do I know that I am a genuine believer?

Peter identifies one distinguishing mark hidden in the heart of a genuine believer. The fact that it is hidden means you cannot know it for sure in other people, but you can know it for sure in yourself.

We must be careful that we do not make false judgments about other people. Peter writes about false teachers who “deny the sovereign Lord” (v2). When you see the word “deny,”

remember who's writing: Peter, who once denied the Lord. If you had been sitting in the courtyard and had heard Peter deny the Lord three times, calling down curses on himself, you might have said, "There you go. He's a counterfeit!" But you would have been wrong.

When a leader falls or fails you do not know what the ultimate outcome will be. There will be many surprises in heaven. We will be surprised both by who is there, and by who is not there.

Godly people are distressed over sin

Peter reminds us about Lot, who was a godly man living in the ungodly city of Sodom. Lot had made a bad decision in choosing where to live, and he experienced a great deal of unhappiness because of that decision.

I want you to notice that Peter doesn't say anything about Lot's bad decision. That's very encouraging. There are some decisions in life that have lasting consequences: Where you live, the career you choose, who you marry. Many people experience great sorrow on account of a life decision that they wish they had made differently. The good news is that a bad decision needn't ruin your life. It may bring you sorrow, but a bad decision can't stop God's grace in your life.

Peter doesn't say anything about Lot's bad decision. He wants us to know one thing about Lot, and that is that he was a righteous man. He says this three times:

[God] rescued Lot, a *righteous man*, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men. For that *righteous man*, living among them day after day, was tormented in his *righteous soul* by the lawless deeds he saw and heard (v7-8).

What is the mark of a righteous man living in an unrighteous world? Peter says he is "distressed" and he is "tormented" day after day. He is distressed over sin in the world around him. And he is distressed over sin in his own soul.

The distinguishing mark is *not* that Lot was without sin. Nobody is without sin in this world—except our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, which is why he's our Lord and Savior. The evidence that Lot was a righteousness man was that he grieved over sin wherever he saw it.

Some of you work in an environment where there is a great deal of unrighteousness. You are not of the world, but you are in the world, and you often find yourself distressed and tormented. I want to give you this encouragement: Your distress over the sin around you is a clear mark of the grace of God in your life!

A true Christian grieves over sin wherever he sees it. That includes the sin in your own soul. A counterfeit Christian takes it very lightly. It doesn't bother him. Can you see this distinguishing mark in your life? Are you bothered about your sins? Do they distress you? Or have you learned to live with the sins that you know?

The distinguishing mark of the true believer is that you are distressed over sin in your own life. The life of a true Christian is marked by a growing and deepening repentance along with faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Does that describe you?

Unrighteous people love sin

Of [the ungodly] the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,” and, “A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud” (v22).

This is a great verse for an illustrated talk to middle school students. It is disgusting! Absolutely gross! The dog returns to its own vomit. It goes back and sniffs around what it has just thrown up. The dog is interested in it, intrigued by it. The dog loves the vomit. The pig that has just been washed goes back to wallowing in the mud. Why? Because pigs love their mud, and the unrighteous man loves his sin. That’s why he keeps going back to it.

Any change in the dog or the pig is merely temporary. The pig was washed and that made it *look* better, but then it goes back to the mud and ends up just as it was before. The dog that was sick *felt* better (you always feel better after you have been sick) but then it goes back to the stuff it just threw up, and ends up as it was before. The pig looked better, the dog felt better, but the dog is still a dog and the pig is still a pig. There is no change in nature, only appearance.

Peter says, “That’s the counterfeit Christian.” You had some kind of religious experience that made you look better or feel better, but you remained the same person you were before. Peter tells us, “If that’s the case, your position is *worse off* than at the beginning” (v20).

We are coming up to graduation time, and I want to speak to our high school students especially today. Some of you know Christ. The Holy Spirit lives in you, and you have everything you need for life in him. I rejoice in what God is doing in your life. I have no fear for you, and neither should your parents.

Others of you are in a different place. You have heard the gospel, and you are familiar with the truth. Other people may think you love Christ, but you know that’s not true. And in a few months you will go off to college.

Other kids on campus who have never been to church will hear the gospel and receive it, and their lives will be changed. But you’ve heard it all before. You are tired of it. You can’t wait to get away from it, and you’ve become hardened to it.

Your familiarity with the truth will make you more resistant to Christ than the kids who have never heard. The kids who respond to it for the first time will be in a better position than you, though you grew up in this church. You will be harder towards the gospel than if you had never heard it. If that is your condition, I fear for you. It is the most dangerous position you can be in.

Every time the gospel is preached, there is an effect in each of our lives: We are drawn nearer to Christ or we move further away. Our hearts are made softer or our hearts are made harder. We create a shell around us. Some of us are no longer affected by the truth.

Some people will go from this service today worse than when they came. Don't let that be true of you. I appeal to you: "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart" (Heb. 4:7). Turn to Christ today and embrace him as your Savior. Don't let your familiarity with the gospel make you harder.

Two Ultimate Outcomes

Peter gives us three examples of how God deals with the godly and with the unrighteous. The first example is the angels who sinned: "God did not spare them but sent them to hell, putting them in gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment" (v4-5).

Thank God for this. Evil in the world is bad enough. What would it be like if all the demons of hell were let loose? Thank God, he holds them in the gloomy dungeons of hell. Even Satan himself can only act within the boundaries set by almighty God. That is what we learn from the book of Job, and supremely from the cross of Christ.

The second example is from the time of Noah: "[God] did not spare the ancient world when he brought the flood on its ungodly people but protected Noah" (v5). God acts in a different way towards different people. He brought the flood on the ungodly; He protected Noah.

The same principle is found in the third example from the time of Lot: "[God] condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly... He rescued Lot, a righteous man..." (v6-7). What do we learn from this?

God knows how to rescue the godly

The Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials... (v9).

That's a great promise. Christian, you love the Lord and you grieve over your sin. You grieve over the sin of the world around you. God knows how to rescue *you* from trials. And he *will* rescue you. You can count on that. You have everything you need for living in this evil world. Everything you need for your battle with the flesh in the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

There's something else that we learn, and it's this:

God knows how to hold the unrighteous

The Lord knows how to... hold the unrighteous for the Day of Judgment, while continuing their punishment (v9).

There is a punishment for sin that begins now. Sin brings the misery of its own consequences in this life. The way of the sinner is hard. But there is worse to come if you refuse to leave this path: "God holds the unrighteous for the day of judgment." Can you feel the weight of these words?

If the truth about your life today is that you love your sins, and you refuse to turn from them, then right now this is what God is doing in your life: He is continuing your punishment, and he is holding you for the day of judgment.

This is not where you want to be. This is not what you want God doing in your life. You do not want to be among the unrighteous who love their sin. You want to be with the godly who grieve their sin, repent of their sin, and turn, on account of their sin, in faith to Jesus Christ crucified.

You say, "How can I change? I've tried. I know myself. I try to change and then I go back to what I was before. I am just like the dog that returns to its own vomit. I am unrighteous. How can I be godly?" "God's divine power has given us everything we need for life and *godliness* through our *knowledge of him* who called us by his own glory and goodness" (1:3). Come to him today.

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