

**Date: 14.9.2011**

**Text: 2 Peter 2:1 – 22**

**Place: midweek**

**Title: Be on your guard!**

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A few years ago a friend of mine went on a holiday to Bali and came home with a bag full of cheap CDs and DVDs.

'I couldn't resist the bargains!' he said. DVDs of movies that haven't even been released in Australia! CDs that are over thirty dollars in Australia he got for under five!

I looked at the CDs with their covers obviously just colour photocopies, and DVDs with spelling mistakes on their covers.

'Don't you think they're a bit dodgy?' I asked.

'Everything's cheap in Bali,' he said. 'And besides, they have different copyright laws over there. It's fine.'

When he played them he found that the music on the CDs didn't match what was on the cover. And when he watched the DVDs you could see silhouettes of heads moving across the screen. Someone had videoed the movie in the cinema and transferred it to DVD. You can imagine what the sound quality was like!

As cheap as they all were, really they were worthless. But as long as gullible Aussies keep going over there, there will always be a market for counterfeits.

Sadly, in **2 Peter 2** we see that there is an ever-present temptation for Christians to snap up what they think are spiritual bargains and end up with destructive counterfeits. This chapter has been described as one of the most terrible and terrifying chapters in the Bible. Peter uses vivid and powerful language to describe the danger the church is in from false teachers.

It's a bit uncomfortable to read nowadays because we are so conscious of not offending. It's against the spirit of the age to say someone is wrong, and especially so in the strong terms Peter uses here. But this isn't just an example of a different time, a harsher time.

You might remember that this is Peter's last letter before his death. As he approaches that time he looks out over the state of the church and can see the threats against it. False teachers are lining up, ready to pounce when the apostles die out. In fact they had already been at work, and Paul and Peter and others had been battling them all along. But as the time approaches when no apostles are left, the floodgates are about to open.

Peter knows that the truth or lack of it will make or break Christianity. More than that, his uncompromising language tells us that the truth is a life-or-death issue. An eternal life-or-death issue!

Peter is led by the Holy Spirit here to warn us that false teachers will come in to savage the churches with the intention to draw away their own disciples. So in this chapter he tells his readers:

Be on your guard!

He does that in four ways.

In **verses 1 – 3** he gives a clear warning about false teachers.

In **verses 4 – 10** he reminds us of the way God will deal with them.

In **verses 10 – 16** he gives an identikit picture so we can recognise them.

And in **verses 17 – 22** he exposes the emptiness of what they offer.

In **verses 1 – 3** Peter gives a dire warning to the church.

He says that false teachers are always going to trouble God's people. In **verse 1** he says that there were false prophets among the people of Israel. The Old Testament shows how false prophets were in plague proportion in Israel. For every one prophet of the Lord there always seemed to be tens if not hundreds of false prophets ready to contradict his message. On Mount Carmel Elijah alone faced off against four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal.

The terrible tragedy was that Israel listened to these false prophets and deserted the Lord God. And they were destroyed as a result.

Peter says here that the church is not immune. **There will be false teachers among you**, he says in **verse 1**. Not *might* be. He goes on to say that they work their poison in secret, quietly and subtly introducing heresies that destroy. They even deny the sovereign Lord who bought them.

Two of the greatest perversions of Christianity do just that.

The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) both assert that they are truly Christian. Their representatives are very polite, very earnest, very persistent. But both these sects deny the sovereign Lord. They deny Jesus' divinity and his uniqueness. And if you deny these fundamental truths you have denied Christianity and all you are left with are destructive lies.

For many of us our defences are up for groups like that. But other false teaching can be far more subtle.

Teaching that encourages us to love God for what we get from him rather than taking up our cross and following Jesus is just as destructive.

Teaching that encourages us to rate our own holiness by looking down on others in judgementalism is just as lethal.

And teaching that substitutes real transformation with legalism and external righteousness is dry and deadly religion rather than true Christianity.

False teaching comes in many forms.

And the terrible thing in **verse 2** is that **many will follow their shameful ways**. When the Soviet Union collapsed there was a desperate need for the gospel. The governments of the newly formed countries actually asked Christians to come and teach them and to train teachers and to plant churches. They did not know how to teach ethics to their children. Almost immediately the sects were in there ready to capitalise on a genuine, but ignorant, spiritual hunger. Wolves ready to pounce, and many have followed the shameful ways of the false teachers.

And not just overseas.

When I was growing up a youth group in a local church was decimated because the youth leader taught them that sex outside of marriage was OK. And they brought the way of truth into disrepute as Peter says at the end of **verse 2**. That church became a joke all around school. It was an opportunity for people to mock Christianity. And the lives of many young, impressionable Christians were wrecked.

In **verse 3** Peter exposes the motivation of false teachers: **In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up.** This stands in stark contrast to what Peter said back in **1:16 We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

The motivation of the apostles was to build Christians up in the truth of the Lord Jesus. These false teachers exploit for their own greed and power.

A little while ago Katherine and I enjoyed a walk to Minyon Falls behind Mullumbimby. It was a great walk, but a damp kind of day. Almost immediately we were covered in leeches! Of all the kinds of animals in the world, I hate parasites: ticks, leeches, intestinal worms. Katherine assures me they must have a positive purpose, but I can't see it! Leeches and ticks feed off the host and get fat while injecting their poison. They give nothing but poison and take everything good in return.

False teachers leech onto true believers and exploit them for their own benefit. They suck out money and vitality and inject back the poison of their destructive, shameful teaching. There is nothing more vile than false teachers because they cannot do anything positive themselves but cling to the true church like ticks on a cat, sucking out the goodness and injecting death.

That's why Peter uses such strong language later in the chapter to describe their behaviour and motives. We'll get to that in a minute, but first we need to ask, 'Why does God let that happen? Why doesn't he just strike them down?'

It's a good question, and Peter describes God's response in **verses 4 – 10**.

At the end of **verse 3** he says **Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.** In **chapter 3** he will talk about God's patience in salvation. Here he speaks about God's patience in judgement. He gives three examples from the Old Testament to show the way God deals with wickedness.

He starts in **verse 4** with the fallen angels. They rebelled against God, and he has held them in hell for future judgement.

In **verse 5** it is the flood, when the whole world was destroyed for its wickedness. But God rescued Noah and his family.

And in **verses 6 – 8** it is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the rescue of Lot.

He summarises his point in **verse 9: the Lord knows how to rescue godly men and holds the unrighteous for the day of judgement.**

In the past God has executed cataclysmic judgement on the wicked. And as Peter says in **verse 6**,

these events are examples of what God will do on the day of judgement. God has set a day when the false teachers will be exposed and judged. Things aren't out of control. He will protect those who are his, and his justice will be made clear.

But in the meantime that means we must be vigilant.

As Christians we can be too trusting. Someone writes a book that is sold in a Christian bookshop and so we believe what they write without question. Someone preaches on TV and we think they must be OK. Now there are many preachers and writers who do deserve their reputation of being faithful and godly. But success and reputation are not automatic indicators of God's blessing.

False teachers may have their day of influence. In God's purposes they will always be around. But God is holding them for judgement at the proper time. We need to be discerning and not led astray.

To help us be discerning Peter gives us an identikit description in **verses 10 – 16** of what to look out for.

In **verses 10 – 12** they have an ugly mix of arrogance and ignorance. They know it all! And so they despise every authority except themselves. They are above the law, above other mere mortals – and above even the celestial beings! They are totally consumed with a sense of their own importance. They are spiritual puffer fish, inflating themselves to impress and intimidate.

The most trouble I've had in churches has come from self-proclaimed prophets. People who say they have a special connection with God and have come to give me a word I've got to follow. But woe to you if you don't agree with them! They accept no-one's authority but their own. They travel from church to church undermining the existing leadership and seeking followers. Proud, poisonous parasites.

In **verses 13 – 16** their brute beast natures are revealed in the way they live. Peter says their eyes are always roving, looking for someone to exploit. Looking people over for what they can get out of them. Moving from church to church, Bible study to Bible study to exploit the lonely, the guilty, the gullible.

In effect Peter is painting a portrait that is the opposite of what he was saying in **chapter 1**. In that chapter he laid out a training regime for godliness. He expressed the expectation that a genuine Christian grows. The power of the Lord Jesus Christ is at work to transform us; a deep and genuine transformation of our thoughts and actions.

That is not evident in these false teachers. They have not been transformed at all. There is no work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They still operate a brute beast level, not only driven by sinful desires but revelling in them.

Peter is saying don't look only at their teaching. It might be hard to spot their lies. But their lives will be obvious. Lives that show no evidence of Christ-likeness are a dead giveaway: No grace. Always about judgement. Majoring on minor issues. Loving the sound of their own voice and opinions. And the results of what they offer are obvious as well.

That's what Peter goes on to describe in **verses 17 – 22**.

What a vivid description **verse 17** is: **These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm.** To thirsty people desperately searching in the desert they are mirages that promise so much but deliver dust.

To farmers anxiously looking to the sky from cracked dam floors they are clouds that scud by without ever dropping rain.

To people seeking the living water Jesus offers they offer nice bottles filled from the Fukushima reactor. Poisonous and deadly.

Instead of offering the grace and glory of the Lord Jesus they appeal to the lustful desires of sinful human nature. The teachers themselves are slaves of depravity. They cannot escape the pull of their own sinful desires. They are in the grip of a moral black hole, being drawn into the blackest darkness of judgement. And they are dragging others with them.

Sometimes it is very difficult to spot the difference between real and fake Christians. But Peter calls us to be alert for counterfeits. Don't be like my friend who bought those CDs and DVDs thinking he was getting a good bargain.

When my mum worked at the bank they had to be aware of counterfeit money. There was a rash of fake fifty dollar notes in circulation. Mum said they were pretty easy to spot. Why? Because as a teller she was handling real money all the time. The moment a fake was presented, she immediately knew by touch and colour.

False teachers can be hard to spot. But it as you and I consistently handle the genuine it becomes easier. The more we expose ourselves to the truth the easier it is to spot a lie. The more we read the Bible the easier we get a gut instinct that something's not quite right about these teachers. They can be very subtle, but the more we open ourselves to the genuine transformation of the Holy Spirit, the more readily we can see a false life.

Don't be sucked in by fakes.

Listen to their teaching.

And look at their lives.