

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. ^{2:1} 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. ² Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. ³ In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. (2 Peter 1:20-2:3)

Tough Questions about False Teachers

Today, God's Word leads us into a discussion of a topic that isn't very pleasant: the reality of false teachers in the world. Our text simply says there will be false teachers among us. And when you look around the world and the church as we know it today, can anyone really doubt that it's true? If you ask people about Jesus, it's amazing the amount of garbage that will come out of their mouths. All last week on my Google News setting, there was a headline that read, "Jesus Hates Religion – He Really Does." Now, I didn't bother to read the article because I didn't need to raise my blood pressure, but that kind of lie is repeated over and over again. So many people invoke Christ to deny what God's Word says that the church is awash in false teaching today.

A more pertinent question for our age is: does anybody care? There was a time in Western history when ordinary people cared deeply about what their church was teaching. Even in this country, a generation or two ago, most church members knew what their church stood for and they took it seriously. But we live in an age in which the fastest growing religious label is "spiritual but not religious." In other words, "keep your doctrine away from me." Most people today don't care what anybody believes and quite frankly, that makes teaching and holding to the doctrines of Scripture in our own congregation an uphill battle. That matters as we strive day by day to live our faith in a sinful world. So today, God's Word leads us into a discussion of false teachers. It won't be light or fun, but it is necessary because we do live in this sinful world. We are the church militant – the church at war with sin and death and the devil. So today, for our own good, God leads us to consider some **tough questions about false teachers.**

I.

The first question that the Apostle Peter leads us to discuss is **where do they come from?** Obviously, they come from the devil, from our unbelieving society and even from the sinful wants and desires of our own hearts. Peter points out that there have always been false teachers and there always will be. He says, "**But there were also false prophets among the people** [that is God's Old Testament people], **just as there will be false teachers among you.**" Until Christ returns, this is just part of life in a sinful world. We can bury our heads in the sand all we want, but they're not going to go away. If we want to be faithful to our Lord, we have to confront this reality.

To help us understand how false teachers work, how they come about and how they challenge us, Peter begins by saying, "**Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.**" He's talking about the prophecies of men like Elijah or Samuel who spoke from God directly to the people, but even more, he's talking about both Old Testament and New Testament scripture and the way that God gave that through men. His main point is that Scripture doesn't come from my own interpretation of what I think God should say. In Peter's day, the church was tormented by false teachers who traveled around making up what they thought God would say. Left to ourselves, we could do no better. Whenever I start an adult membership class, in the very first lesson I tell the students that the class is not about what Geoff Kieta thinks. If it were just that, they could find much better things to do with their time. That class has to be about what God actually says.

False teachers make up their own teachings, or they repeat teaching other false teachers made up for them. In contrast, Peter says, "**For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.**" True teachers are carried along by the Holy Spirit. The men who wrote the Bible gave us God's Word because the Holy Spirit inspired them, he carried them along to

give the message God wanted us to have. Today, we don't have new scriptures being written. That process is finished. So today, true teachers are carried along by the Holy Spirit working through the Word. To be faithful, we must study the word and proclaim the word and be corrected by the word.

So where do false teachers come from? They come from their own sinful hearts. They come from the attitudes of our sinful society and the influence of the devil and they make up what they want God to say. That is so prevalent in our society. On Friday, there was an article in the Detroit Free Press about the Presbyterian Church (USA) approving gay marriage in the big convention they held right here in Detroit. Many gay rights advocates hope that this could influence other churches to take a step like this. And if you listen to the arguments of the people who want that, invariably they say, "Jesus accepted everybody. We need to accept this." Where in the Bible does it say that Jesus accepted homosexuality? It does not. Now, some of these same people will argue that Jesus never said anything about homosexuality, and there is some truth to that. He did not directly address the issue during his ministry on this earth. But he did say that we were to obey all that God commands. And the rest of the Bible – which is his Word – clearly condemns homosexuality as sinful.

But people today don't want to believe that. And you could add a long list of other things people today don't want to believe. They don't want to believe that God would condemn good and sincere Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists to hell. They don't want to believe that God would command us to not commune with people who have different doctrines than we do. They don't want to believe that sex outside of marriage is a sin. And the list goes on and on. All of it is an exercise in ignoring God's Word and saying what people want to hear.

There is a very real spiritual danger here for us: we all have sinful hearts. We all live in this society and want to live in peace with it. More than that, we have a natural human desire to be accepted by our society. We want to belong. We want their approval. So we find ourselves tempted to go along with what most people think about these issues. That's the devil working to get his hooks into us. If we're honest we have to admit that we are tempted, that there are teachings we would be OK with dumping. We have to admit that we have sinful hearts and those hearts that want God to be reasonable. Where does that sin leave us? In danger of hell.

But there is good news for us: Jesus. He was the only perfect follower of God who ever lived. During his life, he knew what God said and he held to it, no matter what. He did that in our place. God sees Jesus being perfect in his commitment to the truth when he looks at us and he calls us perfect. And God sees Jesus laying down his life for all our sin, suffering our pain on the cross, our hell on the cross, our shame and our death on the cross for all the times that we secretly sided with the world around us against God. Jesus paid for that sin. On the third day he rose to announce that we are forgiven, now and forever. We will live with him in joy. That is the heart of the Bible's message. Cling to that and you will want to cling to all that God says. Cling to that message and you aren't following cleverly invented stories or the opinions of our age. You're following Christ. You're led by the Holy Spirit. You walk with God.

II.

So, false teachers come finally from the sin in our own hearts. But where they come from isn't the only tough question they pose. **Where are they going to?** Now, at first, that seems fairly obvious: they're going to hell. But there's more to it than that. Peter says, **"They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves."** False teachers slip false teachings into the church. Peter calls them "destructive heresies." What is a heresy? A heresy is a teaching that is different from what God says in his word. So what false teachings are "destructive"? The ones that send us to hell, right? On one level, then, we can make a distinction between false teachings that automatically destroy your salvation and false teachings that a Christian could honestly hold and still cling to Christ. For instance, any teaching that denies Christ as the true Son of God destroys faith. If you don't believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are not a Christian. Likewise, if you don't believe that Jesus truly paid for your sin or that he rose from the dead, your faith is false. The Bible says that.

On the other hand, you could misunderstand baptism and still be a believer. You could honestly think it's a symbol and not the work of the Holy Spirit because that's what you were taught, but you could still hold that Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world. You could still believe he died for you. You could be confused about the end of the world, or about how we come to faith, or about who we should pray with and still be a Christian. In the end, all of us need to continue to grow in our understanding of God's word and we'll

never be perfect on this side of heaven. We all probably have false ideas about what God says, but we are still believers.

But every false teaching is destructive. Every false teaching hurts our faith. Every false idea is a foothold of Satan in our hearts. From that foothold he wants to reach out and destroy our trust in Christ. Every false idea, if you carried it far enough, would destroy the teaching about Jesus. First of all, it would call into question what the Bible says. Without the Bible, how do we know that Jesus really is our Savior? And every false teaching ultimately makes us trust in something or someone else. It's only the grace of God that overcomes our false ideas and keeps our faith alive.

Peter says, **“Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.”** False teaching always leads to sin. Whether it's sexual sins or drunkenness or more subtle things, in God's sight, all sin is shameful. When believers live in open sin, it brings the way of truth, the Christian life, into disrepute. How often are all Christians mocked because televangelists get greedy or get caught in bed with their secretaries? How much has the Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal undermined confidence in all pastors and teachers? How much do the lies and hypocrisy of some Christians make it easy for the world to dismiss us?

Peter says that false teachers will exploit us. They use people of faith for their own ends. Now, understand that Peter here is talking about the most extreme case: the hypocrite who believes nothing and cynically uses the goodwill of believers for his own advantage. There is another kind of false teacher. There is the person who sincerely believes, but his doctrines are confused. That person is not going to hell. But his false doctrine does still wreak havoc on the church. We saw that in the US during the 20th century. Sincere Christian people wanted to be open minded and to receive different ideas into the church. In many cases, they honestly thought that the Bible would allow for that level of diversity. But as a result, today, unbelief reigns in many corners of the visible Christian church.

But Peter says, **“Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping.”** Judgment Day is coming. On that day, God is going to sort out who was a weak and confused believer and who was an unbeliever exploiting his church. He will send all those who worked to destroy the faith to hell. As discouraging as it is to have so many people twisting God's word, God warns about this because he plans to rescue us. The Holy Spirit will work through the word until Christ returns. As he did with Peter and Paul and Matthew and Mark, God will continue to provide his church with faithful pastors and teachers who will lead his people with the gospel. God will preserve the true teaching and the true faith and he will keep you and me safe from all harm and danger.

It's never fun to focus on the dangers that false teachers present. But to be fully equipped we must understand them so that we are committed to hearing and supporting and following the truth. And through it all, our comfort is simply this: the Lord knows those who are his. He will preserve us from all the attacks of Satan, even those that come from false teachers, and he will bring us home to heaven. Trust in that promise and dedicate yourself to hearing and learning his word. God will work through that word. Amen.