

## Special Studies in 2 Peter Applying Peter's Message about False Teachers

**Intro:** In our earlier studies we've tried to give a careful exegesis of the text, seeking to understand Peter's message in its context. However, there are special questions of application that challenge us when we read the Scriptures.

One of those comes when we think about 2 Peter 2. Let's consider tonight how to apply Peter's message about false teachers.

### Peter's warning

*"BUT false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves." (2 Peter 2:1)*

*It is interesting to note that Peter uses here a term that is not found in any other NT text; but clearly in this context he gives us an ample description of the kind of teacher he has in mind. In our earlier studies we saw these characteristics of the false teacher.*

They will be factious, apostate, self-condemned, popular, destructive, covetous, and doomed for destruction.

In that connection, he shows that they will partake of that destruction that God has already demonstrated in the past in His judgment of angels, of the ancient world, and of Sodom and Gomorrah, while He at the same time delivered the righteous like Noah and Lot.

In terms of God's authority, they are rebellious, daring, self-willed, and fearless of God's judgment.

In terms of God's ethics, they live like animals, reveling during the day, with eyes full adultery, and are covetous in heart.

*It would appear that Peter has given us enough information to know what we're looking for in a "false teacher;" yet we live in a world where there are a multitude of voices teaching various things that contradict one another. Some of those voices may be our brethren in the local congregation; or brethren who are part of another congregation.*

*How are we to apply Peter's warnings concerning false teachers? Are we to think of everyone who may disagree with us personally a false teacher?*

### Thoughts on Application

*It is important to contextualize Peter's portrayal of the false teacher. He seems to be thinking of men who have lived in the apostolic age and have known the truth from the apostles of Christ. To that extent they appear to be men who have knowingly rejected the truth not only about Jesus but about the lifestyle that the gospel teaches. In their case the description is very much like the warning Jesus gave of false prophets to come.*

*Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.*

*Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits. (Matthew 7:15–21)*

Jesus' briefer description is quite comparable to Peter's description of the false teacher.

***The issue becomes more complex when we recognize the challenge that comes through many centuries of religious change and increasing distance from the apostolic age. There is a huge diversity of religious viewpoints involving people who appear to be quite conscientious in their faith. They may give evidence of faith in Jesus and live a highly moral life, unlike the false teachers of 2 Peter 2. What should we say about them?***

The Bible affirms that people may in good conscience believe and practice error.

*“AND Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.” (Acts 23:1)*

Consequently even those who profess to believe in Christ and live morally may have embraced an erroneous doctrinal system that results in disobedience to the gospel.

We need to view them with compassion.

Though we would not say that the truth taught by the apostles cannot be known; it would be foolish to think that 20 centuries of religious debate and creedal formation doesn't get in the way of clearly hearing what God has to say in the Scriptures. We don't have the luxury of asking an apostle in person what he meant by a passage we find difficult.

And it is wise to recognize that that could happen to us as well as anyone else.

But as Christians, we have no choice but to not honor them as brethren, even though we may treat them with respect for their apparent sincerity and conscientiousness.

The Judaizing teachers of the first century taught "another gospel." They professed faith in Jesus, but added to the gospel conditions of salvation contrary to the teaching of the apostles. Paul spoke plainly about their condition:

*“I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any*

*man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:6–9)*

Paul referred to them as "false brethren."

*“But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you.” (Galatians 2:4–5)*

Would Paul say anything different today about those who take away conditions of the gospel or substitute other acts for the obedience God has commanded?

John likewise is also likely thinking of people like this who claim some faith in Jesus but who have changed the gospel's presentation of Him.

*Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting; (2 Jn. 9–10)*

John makes clear that such people should not be welcomed or supported by believers.

***Even among those who have obeyed the gospel there may be a diversity of points of view about matters that involve both congregational activity and individual activity. Even those who have obeyed the true gospel may not always agree on these points. What are we then to do?***

First though we acknowledge that the truth can be known, we must acknowledge that Christians may be at differing points of maturity in their understanding of the word; and that will affect what they think they can conscientiously do. Paul speaks of those both "weak in faith" and "strong in faith" in Romans 14.

Even here in 2 Peter, Peter acknowledges that the Christian life is a process of growth that presumes that we all increase in our understanding and knowledge of the truth with time and careful study. *You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 3:17–18)*

God instituted an approach that brings Christians together to learn from each other, to hear His word in community.

*“As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of*

*each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” (Ephesians 4:14–16)*

I hear my brethren often say things I do not believe or teach. I would not call them "false teachers" and suggest a sentence of eternal condemnation on the basis of my disagreement with them. I would simply try to take advantage of the process of edification to bring them to a better understanding. I would hope others would do the same for me.

While continuing to strive for the most perfect understanding of truth, there are two things that we can do:

First we can find brethren with whom we sufficiently agree to engage in congregational worship and work with a good conscience.

Second we can allow for individual Christians at that place to practice what their faith dictates when such does not undermine the fundamental principles of moral conduct.

*“NOW accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” (Romans 14:1–4)*

However the NT disciplinary passages make clear that the practice of the works of the flesh cannot be called acts of faith; rather their practice represents a turn from faith back to the way of the world.

*“But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.” (1 Corinthians 5:11–13)*

Reject the divisive brother.

*Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.” (Titus 3:10–11)*

The divisive brother sabotages the process God intends to use to bring us to unity.

When we leave room for some measure of disagreement among brethren, there are three things we need to remember:

All truth is important; and it matters to God what we say about His word.

The goal of patience acceptance of others is not to leave them as they are; but help them to grow in their understanding. God is final judge of all men. Who he determines to accept based on His grace is His decision. Our acceptance doesn't mean God's acceptance.

**Conclusion: The church should beware of unprincipled men who destroy God's cause. The church should love and support principled men who seek to build it and help them grow in their understanding. The criteria Peter gives will help us avoid being led astray while learning from those who may teach us more perfectly God's way.**