

2 Peter 2:15-22
October 15, 2017

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

In case you haven't gotten enough teaching on false teachers, today will be fulfilling! We are getting to the end of Peter's list of attributes false teachers. As we said last week, just because you see an attribute typically associated with a false teacher doesn't mean that a teacher is automatically a false teacher. But it's an invitation to discern through prayer and further bible study. If something doesn't sound "quite right," check it out.

Transition: So we are picking up where we left off from last week. We covered additional attributes that were presented in v.12-14. Today, we will learn more attributes or descriptors starting at v.15. By time we leave class today, **we should be able to detect a false teacher BY recognizing their ATTRIBUTES.** Let's begin.

BOOK (NIV 1984):

V.15:

- They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness.

V.16:

- But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—a beast without speech—who spoke with a man's voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

V.17:

- These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them.

V.18:

- For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error.

V.19:

- They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.

V.20:

- If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.

V.21:

- It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.

V.22:

- Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud."

Process Observations/Questions:

Q V.15-16: What is the next ATTRIBUTE of a false teacher? [They left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam, son of Beor]

Q: Who is Balaam? [Balaam was a Gentile prophet of God who tried to curse the Jews during the days of Balak, who was the king of the Moabites. Balak feared Israel, so he turned to Balaam for help.]

Balaam had some knowledge of the true God; and was held in such reputation that it was supposed that he whom he blessed was blessed, and he whom he cursed was cursed. When the Israelites were encamped on the plains of Moab, on the east of Jordan, by Jericho, Balak sent for Balaam “from Aram, out of the mountains of the east,” to curse them; but by the remarkable interposition of God he was utterly unable to fulfil Balak’s wish, however desirous he was to do so.

Q: What does Peter mean? [He is referencing Balaam, a Gentile prophet who tried to curse the Jews. Balak, the king of the Moabites, was afraid of Israel, so he turned to Balaam for help. Balaam knew it was wrong to cooperate with Balak, but his heart was covetous and he wanted the money and honor that Balak promised him. Balaam knew the truth of God and the will of God, yet he deliberately abandoned the right way and went astray.]

From the outset, God told Balaam not to help Balak and, at first, Balaam obeyed and sent the messengers home. But when Balak sent more princes and promised more money and honor, Balaam decided to “pray about it again” and reconsider the matter. The second time, God tested Balaam and permitted him to go with the princes. This was not God’s direct will; it was His permissive will, designed to see what the prophet would do.

Balaam jumped at the chance! But when he started to go astray, God rebuked the disobedient prophet through the mouth of his donkey. How remarkable that the animals obey God, even when their masters do not! (read Isa. 1:3) God permitted Balaam to set up his altars and offer his sacrifices, but God did not permit him to curse Israel. Instead, God turned Balaam’s curse into a blessing (Deut. 23:4–5; Neh. 13:2).

Since God didn’t allow Balaam to curse the Jews as Balak requested, Balaam was able to tell Balak how to defeat Israel. All the Moabites had to do was invite the Jews to be “friendly neighbors” and share in their feasts (Num. 25). Instead of maintaining its separated position, Israel compromised and joined the pagan orgies of the Moabites.

Q V.17-18: What is the next ATTRIBUTE of a false teacher? [They are springs without water and mists driven by a storm]

[The word translated “mist” means “blackness, gloom,” so “the blackness of the darkness” would be an accurate translation (see 2 Peter 2:4). These apostates promise to lead people into the light, but they themselves end up in the darkest part of the darkness!]

Since these false teachers have nothing to give, how are they able to attract followers? [See v.18]

Q: What does Peter mean? Hint: See v.18 [they mouth **empty, boastful words** and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error]

Q: What does he mean by “people who are just escaping from those who live in error?” [These people are NOT believers, according to most commentators. However, some bible students say Peter is referring to those enticed by these heretics/false teachers, who recently escaped from their pagan companions who live in falsehood.]

Q V.19: What is the next ATTRIBUTE of a false teacher? [They promise freedom]

Q: What is the problem with them promising freedom? [You can't set someone free if you are in bondage yourself! It's like a 300-lb man selling diet books.]

Q V.20-21: This verse causes some confusion, and how it's resolved depends on how you interpret “they.” There are four views:

(1) Some suggest that the word “they” refers to the **false teachers** rather than the targets of their attack (e.g., Edwin A. Blum, “2 Peter” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12:282).

(2) But the connection between the end of verse 18 (“people who are just escaping from those who live in error”) and the beginning of verse 20 (“if they have escaped the corruption of the world”) seems to favor a reference to the unstable, unsaved people who were “listeners” of the gospel (v. 18).

(3) Others think the reference might encompass both the false teachers and their “converts,” who can lose their salvation. This, however, runs counter to many passages that assure believers of eternal salvation.

(4) Another view is that new believers are warned against being “caught up into a life of carnality ... only to find that there is even less pleasure, less fulfillment than before they were saved” (Duane A. Dunham, “An Exegetical Study of 2 Peter 2:18–22,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140. January=March, 1983:51).

Bottom Line: Whether **they** in verse 20 refers to the teachers or their victims, both groups had available to them knowledge about **Jesus Christ**, which could produce liberty and life. But when that knowledge was rejected, their end was deeper corruption (**again entangled in it and overcome**) and presumably a more severe degree of punishment. Indeed, they **would have been better off never to have known the gospel, the way of righteousness, and the sacred (holy) commandment** (i.e., the apostolic message) **than to have known the truth and have deliberately violated it**. It is also important that we remember that these false teachers are not truly born-again people. Jude described these same people in his letter and stated clearly that they were “sensual, having not the Spirit” (Jude 19). It is not profession of spirituality that marks a true believer but possession of the Spirit of God within (Rom. 8:9).

V.22 Observation: Jews considered both dogs and pigs among the lowest of creatures (cf. Matt. 7:6) so Peter chose these animals to describe people who knew the truth and turned away from it. The first proverb, **A dog returns to its vomit**, is taken from Proverbs 26:11. The second proverb, **A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud**, was presumably

commonly known by Jews in the first century. The underlying principle of both is the same: these apostates (whether false teachers, their victims, or both) never were what they seemed to be and returned to what they had been all along.

LOOK:

False teachers appear to have successful ministries, but in the end, they are bound to fail. The important thing is that we have the assurance of a true experience with the Lord, and that we have nothing to do with these counterfeit ministries, no matter how popular they may be.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 2, pp. 414–420). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Their Revolting (2 Peter 2:14b–16)

“They have abandoned the right road” is the way the Phillips translation expresses it. The apostates know the right road, the straight path that God has established, but they deliberately abandon God’s way for their own. No wonder Peter called them “natural brute beasts” (2 Peter 2:12) and compared them to animals (2 Peter 2:22). “Be ye not as the horse, or as the mule!” warned the psalmist (Ps. 32:9). The horse likes to rush ahead and the mule likes to lag behind; both can get you off the right path. Believers are sheep, and sheep need to stay close to the shepherd or they will stray.

We have already learned one reason for the apostates’ godless conduct: they want to satisfy the cravings of their flesh. But there is a second reason: they are covetous and want to exploit people for personal gain. Peter mentioned this in 2 Peter 2:3 and now develops the thought. Not only is the false teacher’s outlook controlled by his passions (2 Peter 2:14a), but his heart is controlled by covetousness. He is in bondage to lust for pleasure and money!

In fact, he has perfected the skill of getting what he wants. “They are experts in greed” says the *New International Version*, and the Phillips translation is even more graphic: “Their technique of getting what they want is, through long practice, highly developed.” They know exactly how to motivate people to give. While the true servant of God trusts the Father to meet his needs and seeks to help people grow through their giving, the apostate trusts his “fund-raising skills” and leaves people in worse shape than he found them. He knows how to exploit the unstable and the innocent.

There is certainly nothing wrong with a ministry sharing its opportunities and needs with its praying friends. My wife and I receive many publications and letters of this kind, and, quite frankly, some of them we throw away without reading. We have learned that these ministries cannot be trusted, that their dramatic appeals are not always based on fact, and that the funds donated are not always used as they should be. The other letters and publications we read carefully, pray about, discuss, and see if God would have us invest in their work. We know we cannot support every good work that God has raised up, so we try to exercise discernment, and invest in the ministries God has chosen for us.

As Peter wrote about the devious practices of these people, he could only exclaim, “Cursed children!” They were not the “blessed” children of God but the cursed children of the devil (John 8:44). They might succeed in building up their bank accounts, but in the end, at the throne of God, they would be declared bankrupt. “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26)

Covetousness is the insatiable desire for more—more money, more power, more prestige. The covetous heart is never satisfied. This explains why the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10), for when a person craves more money, he will commit any sin to satisfy that craving. He has already broken the first two of the Ten Commandments, because money is already his god and idol. It is then a simple step to break the others—to steal, lie, commit adultery, take God’s name in vain, and so on. No wonder Jesus warned, “Take heed and beware of covetousness” (Luke 12:15).

I have read that the people in North Africa have devised a clever way to catch monkeys. They make a hole in a gourd just large enough for the monkey's paw, then fill the gourd with nuts and tie it to a tree. At night, the monkey reaches into the gourd for the nuts, only to find he cannot pull his paw out of the gourd! Of course, he could let go of the nuts and escape quite easily—but he doesn't want to forfeit the nuts! He ends up being captured because of his covetousness. We might expect this kind of stupidity in a dumb animal, but certainly not in a person made in the image of God; yet it happens every day.

Peter knew his Old Testament Scriptures. He had already used Noah and Lot to illustrate his words, and in 2 Peter 2:15–16, he used the Prophet Balaam. The story of Balaam is found in Numbers 22–25; take time now to read it.

Balaam is a mysterious character, a Gentile prophet who tried to curse the Jews. Balak, the king of the Moabites, was afraid of Israel, so he turned to Balaam for help. Balaam knew it was wrong to cooperate with Balak, but his heart was covetous and he wanted the money and honor that Balak promised him. Balaam knew the truth of God and the will of God, yet he deliberately abandoned the right way and went astray. He is a perfect illustration of the apostates in their covetous practices.

From the outset, God told Balaam not to help Balak and, at first, Balaam obeyed and sent the messengers home. But when Balak sent more princes and promised more money and honor, Balaam decided to “pray about it again” and reconsider the matter. The second time, God tested Balaam and permitted him to go with the princes. This was not God's direct will; it was His permissive will, designed to see what the prophet would do.

Balaam jumped at the chance! But when he started to go astray, God rebuked the disobedient prophet through the mouth of his donkey. How remarkable that the animals obey God, even when their masters do not! (read Isa. 1:3) God permitted Balaam to set up his altars and offer his sacrifices, but God did not permit him to curse Israel. Instead, God turned Balaam's curse into a blessing (Deut. 23:4–5; Neh. 13:2).

Balaam was not able to curse Israel, but he was able to tell Balak how to defeat Israel. All the Moabites had to do was invite the Jews to be “friendly neighbors” and share in their feasts (Num. 25). Instead of maintaining its separated position, Israel compromised and joined the pagan orgies of the Moabites. God had to discipline the people and thousands of them died.

You can see in Balaam the two aspects of apostasy that Peter emphasized in this chapter: sensual lust and covetousness. He loved money and he led Israel into lustful sin. He was a man who could get messages from God, yet he led people away from God! When you read his oracles, you cannot help but be impressed with his eloquence; yet he deliberately disobeyed God! Balaam said, “I have sinned” (Num. 22:34), but his confession was not sincere. He even prayed, “Let me die the death of the righteous” (Num. 23:10), yet he did not want to live the life of the righteous.

Because Balaam counseled Balak to seduce Israel, God saw to it that Balaam was judged. He was slain by the sword when Israel defeated the Midianites (Num. 31:8). We wonder who received all the wealth that he had “earned” by his devious ways. Peter called his hire “the wages of unrighteousness.” This phrase reminds us of another pretender, Judas, who received “the reward of iniquity” (Acts 1:18), and who also perished in shame.

We will have more to say about Balaam when we study Jude 11, but we must not ignore the main lesson: he was a rebel against the will of God. Like the false teachers that Peter described, Balaam knew the right way, but deliberately chose the wrong way because he wanted to make money. He kept “playing with the will of God” by trying to get “a different viewpoint” (Num.

22:41; 23:13, 27). He no doubt had a true gift from God because he uttered some beautiful prophecies about Jesus Christ, but he prostituted that gift to base uses just to gain honor and wealth.

A bank officer approached a junior clerk and secretly asked, "If I gave you \$50,000, would you help me alter the books?"

"Yes, I guess I would," the man replied.

"Would you do it for \$100?"

"Of course not!" the man said. "What do you think I am, a common thief?"

"We've already determined that," said the officer. "Now we're talking about price."

The person who is covetous does have his price, and when it is met, he will do whatever is asked, even revolt against the will of God. Peter called this attitude *madness*. The word means "to be deranged, out of your mind." But Balaam thought he was doing the wise thing; after all, he was taking advantage of a situation that might never come along again. But any rebellion against God is madness and can only lead to tragedy. It was when the prodigal son "came to himself" that he realized how stupid he had been (Luke 15:17).

Peter has condemned three sins of the false teachers: their reviling, their reveling, and their revolting. All of these sins spring from pride and selfish desire. A true servant of God is humble and seeks to serve others (see the contrast in Phil. 2:20–21). The true servant of God does not think about praise or pay, because he serves God from a loving and obedient heart. He honors God and the authority that God has established in this world. In short, the true servant of God patterns himself after Jesus Christ.

In these last days there will be an abundance of false teachers pleading for support. They are gifted and experienced when it comes to deceiving people and getting their money. It is important that God's people be established in the truth, that they know how to detect when the Scriptures are being twisted and the people exploited. I thank God for agencies that help to expose "religious rackets," but there is still the need for spiritual discernment and a growing knowledge of the Word of God.

Not all of these "religious frauds" will be discovered and put out of business. But God will one day deal with all of them! Like animals, they will be "taken and destroyed" (2 Peter 2:12). They will receive "the reward of unrighteousness" (2 Peter 2:13) to compensate for the wages they have exploited from others. As "cursed children" (2 Peter 2:14) they will be banished from the presence of the Lord forever.

They are marked men and women; they will not escape.

FALSE FREEDOM

2 Peter 2:17–22

It is a frightening fact that many people who are now zealous members of cults were at one time attending churches that at least professed to believe the Christian Gospel. They participated in the Communion service and saw the death of the Lord Jesus portrayed in the loaf and the cup. They even recited the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. Yet today, these people will tell you that they "feel free" now that they have been "liberated" from the Christian faith.

At the same time, you will meet people who have rejected all religious faith and now profess to enjoy a new freedom. "I used to believe that stuff," they will boldly confess, "but I don't believe it anymore. I've got something better and I feel free for the first time in my life."

Freedom is a concept that is very important in today's world, yet not everybody really understands what the word means. In fact, everybody from the Communist to the "playboy" seems to have his own definition. Nobody is completely free in the sense of having the ability and the opportunity to do whatever he wants to do. For that matter, doing whatever you please is *not* freedom—it is the worst kind of bondage.

The apostates offer freedom to their converts, and this "bait" entices them to abandon the true faith and follow the false teachers. The teachers promise them liberty, but this promise is never fulfilled; the unstable converts only find themselves in terrible bondage. The freedom offered is a *false* freedom, and Peter gave three reasons that explain why it is false.

It Is Based on False Promises (2 Peter 2:17–18)

Faith is only as good as the object. A pagan may have great faith in his idol, but the idol can do nothing for him. I have a friend who put his faith in a certain investment scheme and lost almost everything. His faith was strong but the company was weak. When you put your faith in Jesus Christ, that faith will accomplish something, because God always keeps His promises. "There hath not failed one word of all His good promise" (1 Kings 8:56).

Peter uses three vivid illustrations to emphasize the emptiness of the apostates' promises.

"Wells without water" (v. 17a). The Greek word actually means "a flowing spring" rather than a tranquil well. It is the word our Lord used when He ministered to the Samaritan woman (John 4:14) and that John used in describing the satisfaction the saints will experience for all eternity (Rev. 7:17; 21:6). A spring without water is not a spring at all! A well is still called a well even if the water is gone, but a spring ceases to exist if the water is not flowing.

There is in mankind an inborn thirst for reality, for God. "Thou hast made us for Thyself," said Augustine, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." People attempt to satisfy this thirst in many ways, and they end up living on substitutes. Only Jesus Christ can give inner peace and satisfaction.

"Whosoever drinketh [present tense, "keeps on drinking"] of this water [in the well] shall thirst again," said Jesus, "but whosoever drinketh [takes one drink once and for all] of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst" (John 4:13–14). What a contrast! You may drink repeatedly at the broken cisterns of the world and never find satisfaction, but you may take one drink of the Living Water through faith in Jesus Christ, and you will be satisfied forever. The false teachers could not make this kind of an offer, because they had nothing to offer. They could promise, but they could not produce.

"Clouds that are carried with a tempest" (v. 17b). The picture is that of clouds of fog or mist being driven by a squall over a lake or sea. Clouds ought to announce the possibility of rain, but these clouds only announce that a windstorm is coming. Jude's description is, "Clouds they are without water, carried about of winds" (Jude 12). Again, there is noise, motion, and something to watch, but nothing profitable happens. The farmer sees the clouds and prays they will empty rain on his parched fields. The false teachers have nothing to give; they are empty.

"The mist of darkness" (v. 17c–18). The word translated "mist" means "blackness, gloom," so "the blackness of the darkness" would be an accurate translation (see 2 Peter 2:4). These apostates promise to lead people into the light, but they themselves end up in the darkest part of the darkness! (see Jude 6 and 13) The atmosphere of hell is not uniform: some places will be darker than others. How tragic that innocent people will be led astray by these apostates and possibly end up in hell with them.

Since these false teachers really have nothing to give, how are they able to attract followers? The reasons are found in 2 Peter 2:18.

First, the teachers are eloquent promoters of their doctrines. They know how to impress people with their vocabulary, “inflated words that say nothing” (literal translation). The average person does not know how to listen to and analyze the kind of propaganda that pours out of the mouths and printing presses of the apostates. Many people cannot tell the difference between a religious huckster and a sincere servant of Jesus Christ.

Do not be impressed with religious oratory. Apollos was a fervent and eloquent religious speaker, but he did not know the right message to preach (Acts 18:24–28). Paul was careful not to build his converts’ faith on either his words or his wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1–5). Paul was a brilliant man, but his ministry was simple and practical. He preached to *express* and not to *impress*. He knew the difference between *communication* and *manipulation*.

The second reason the apostates are so successful is that they appeal to the base appetites of the old nature. This is part of their bait! (2 Peter 2:14) We must not think of “the lusts of the flesh” only in terms of sexual sins, for the flesh has other appetites. Read the list given in Galatians 5:19–21 and you will see the many different kinds of “bait” the apostates have available for baiting their traps.

For example, *pride* is one of the sins of the flesh, and apostate teachers like to appeal to the human ego. A true servant of God will lovingly tell people that they are lost sinners, under the wrath of a holy God, but the apostate minister will try to avoid “putting people on a guilt trip.” He will tell his listeners how good they are, how much God loves them *and needs them* and how easy it is to get into the family of God. In fact, he may tell them they are already in God’s family and just need to start living like it! The apostate avoids talking about repentance, because egotistical men do not want to repent.

The third reason they are successful is that they appeal to immature people, people who have “very recently escaped” from their old ways. The apostate has no message for the down-and-out sinner, but he does have a message for the new believer.

A pastor friend of mine was assisting some missionaries in the Philippines by conducting open-air meetings near the university. Students who wanted to decide for Christ were asked to step into a building near the square, and there they were counseled and also given follow-up material to help them get started in their Christian life.

No sooner did a new convert walk out the door and past the crowd than a cultist would join him and start to introduce his own religion! All the apostates had to do was look for the people carrying follow-up material! This same procedure is often used in large evangelistic crusades: the false teachers are ready to pounce on new believers carrying decision packets.

This is why it is important that soul-winners, pastors, and other Christian workers ground new converts in the faith. Like newborn babies, new Christians need to be protected, fed, and established before they can be turned loose in this dangerous world. One reason Peter wrote this letter was to warn the church to care for the new Christians, because the false teachers were out to get them! We cannot blame new believers for being “unstable” (2 Peter 2:14) if we have not taught them how to stand.

The freedom the apostates offer is a false freedom because it is based on false promises. There is a second reason why it is false.

It Is Offered by False Christians (2 Peter 2:19–20)

You cannot set someone free if you are in bondage yourself, and these false teachers were in bondage. Peter made it clear that these men had temporarily disentangled themselves from the pollutions of the world, but then they went right back into bondage again! They professed to be saved but had never really been redeemed (set free) at all!

The tenses of the verbs in 2 Peter 2:19 are present: “While they *promise* them [the new believers] liberty, they themselves [the apostates] *are* the servants of corruption” (italics mine). They claim to be the servants of God, but they are only the servants of sin. It is bad enough to be a slave, but when sin is your master, you are in the worst possible condition a person can experience.

As you review what Peter has written so far, you can see the kinds of sins that enslave the false teachers. For one thing, they were in bondage to money (2 Peter 2:3, 14). Their covetousness forced them to use every kind of deceptive technique to exploit innocent people. They were also in bondage to fleshly lust (2 Peter 2:10, 14). They had their eyes on weak women whom they could seduce. (In view of what Peter and Jude wrote about Sodom and Gomorrah, perhaps we should also include weak men and boys.)

They were also enslaved by pride (2 Peter 2:10–12). They thought nothing of speaking evil of those in places of authority, including the angels and God! They promoted themselves and derided everybody else. Sad to say, there are people who admire this kind of arrogance, who follow these proud men and support them.

It is interesting to compare the three men Peter named in this chapter—Noah, Lot, and Balaam. Noah kept himself completely separated from the apostasy of the world of his day. He boldly preached God’s righteousness and was faithful in his walk and witness, even though no one but his family followed the Lord.

Lot knew the truth and kept himself pure, but he did not keep himself separated; he lost his family as a result. Lot hated the wickedness of Sodom, yet he lived in the midst of it and, by doing so, exposed his daughters and wife to godless influences.

Balaam not only followed the ways of sin, but he encouraged other people to sin! He told Balak how to seduce the nation Israel and his plan almost succeeded. Lot lost his family, but Balaam lost his life.

Beware of “the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). Sin always promises freedom but in the end brings bondage. It promises life but instead brings death. Sin has a way of gradually binding a person until there is no way of escape, apart from the gracious intervention of the Lord. Even the bondage that sin creates is deceitful, for the people who are bound actually think they are free! Too late they discover that they are prisoners of their own appetites and habits.

Jesus Christ came to bring freedom. In His first sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, our Lord sounded forth the trumpet call of freedom and the advent of the “Year of Jubilee” (Luke 4:16ff). But Christ’s *meaning* of freedom is different from the apostates’ as is His method for accomplishing it.

In the Bible, freedom does not mean “doing your own thing” or “having it your way.” That attitude is the very essence of sin. The freedom that Jesus Christ offers means *enjoying fulfillment in the will of God*. It means achieving your greatest potential to the glory of God. The Quaker leader Rufus Jones, paraphrasing Aristotle, said, “The true nature of a thing is the highest that it can become.” Jesus Christ frees us to become our very best in this life, and then to be like Him in the next.

The apostates brought their followers into bondage by means of lies, but our Lord brings us into freedom by means of truth. “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”

(John 8:32). He was speaking, of course, about the truth of the Word of God. “Sanctify them through Thy truth,” He prayed; “Thy Word is truth” (John 17:17). Through the Word of God, we discover the truth about ourselves, our world, and our God. As we face this truth honestly, we experience the liberating power of the Spirit of God. We cease living in a world of fantasy and enter a world of reality, and through the power of God, we are able to fulfill His will, grow in grace, and “reign in life by one, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17).

Those who live by God’s truth enter into more and more freedom, but those who live by lies experience more and more bondage, until “the latter end is worse with them than the beginning” (2 Peter 2:20). This reminds us of our Lord’s parable in Matthew 12:43–45, the truth of which parallels what Peter has written. *Temporary reformation without true repentance and rebirth only leads to greater sin and judgment.* Reformation cleans up the outside, but regeneration changes the inside.

Sinful tendencies do not disappear when a person reforms; they merely hibernate *and get stronger*. Holiness is not simply refusing to do evil things, for even unsaved people can practice self-control. True holiness is more than conquering temptation: it is conquering even *the desire* to disobey God. When my doctor told me to lose weight, he said, “I’ll tell you how to do it: learn to hate the things that aren’t good for you.” His advice worked!

You can expect nothing but “false freedom” from false Christians who offer false promises. But there is a third reason why this freedom is false.

It Involves a False Experience (2 Peter 2:21–22)

Peter called these apostates “natural brute beasts” (2 Peter 2:12), and then ended the warning by describing them as pigs and dogs! But he was not simply showing his personal disdain for them; rather, he was teaching a basic spiritual lesson.

It is very important that we understand that the pronoun *they* in this entire paragraph (2 Peter 2:17–22) refers to the false teachers and not to their converts. It is also important that we remember that these teachers are not truly born-again people. Jude described these same people in his letter and stated clearly that they were “sensual, having not the Spirit” (Jude 19). It is not *profession* of spirituality that marks a true believer but *possession* of the Spirit of God within (Rom. 8:9).

But these apostates did have a “religious experience”! And they would boldly claim that their experience brought them into fellowship with the Lord. They would be able to explain “the way of righteousness,” and would use the Word of God to support their teachings. If they had not experienced some kind of “religious conversion,” they would never have been able to get into the fellowship of the local assemblies.

But their experience, like their promises, was false.

Since Peter wrote both of his letters to the same group of believers we may assume that they had the doctrinal foundation presented so clearly in his first letter. Peter emphasized the new birth (1 Peter 1:3, 22–25). He reminded his readers that they were “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). In his first letter, Peter described the believers as sheep (1 Peter 2:25; 5:1–4). Our Lord used this same image when He reinstated Peter into the apostleship after his denials (John 21:15–17).

There is no indication that the false teachers had ever experienced the new birth. They had *knowledge* of salvation and could use the language of the church, but they lacked that true saving experience with the Lord. At one time they had even received the Word of God (2 Peter 2:21), but then they turned away from it. *They never trusted Christ and became His sheep.*

Instead of being sheep, they were pigs and dogs—and keep in mind that the dogs in that day were not pampered pets! The Jews called the Gentiles “dogs” because a dog was nothing but a filthy scavenger who lived on garbage! It was hardly a title of respect and endearment!

These men could point to “an experience,” but it was a *false* experience. Satan is the counterfeiter. We have already seen that Satan has a false gospel (Gal. 1:6–9), preached by false ministers (2 Cor. 11:13–15), producing false Christians (2 Cor. 11:26—“in perils among false brethren”). In His Parable of the Tares, our Lord taught that Satan plants his counterfeits (“the children of the wicked one”) wherever God plants true believers (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43).

What kind of “experience” did these false teachers have? To use Peter’s vivid images, the pig was washed on the outside, but remained a pig; the dog was “cleaned up” on the inside, but remained a dog. The pig *looked* better and the dog *felt* better, but neither one had been changed. They each had the same old nature, not a new one.

This explains why both animals returned to the old life: it was part of their nature. A pig can stay clean only a short time and then must head for the nearest mudhole. We do not condemn a pig for acting like a pig because it has a pig’s nature. If we saw a *sheep* heading for the mire, we would be concerned!

When I was a youngster, one of our neighbors owned a scrubby black mutt with the imaginative name of “Blackie.” He had the habit of eating what dogs should not eat, and then regurgitating somewhere in the neighborhood, usually on our sidewalk. But that was not all. Blackie would then return to the scene of the crime and start all over again! Apparently dogs have been doing this for centuries, for Solomon mentioned it in Proverbs 26:11, the text that Peter quoted.

Certainly the dog feels better after emptying his stomach, *but it is still a dog*. “Having an experience” did not change his nature. Quite the contrary, it only gave further evidence of his “dog nature,” because he came back and (just like a dog) lapped up his own vomit. It is a disgusting picture, but that is exactly the response Peter wanted to produce.

In my ministry, I have met people who have told me about their “spiritual experiences,” but in their narratives I detected no evidence of a new nature. Like the sow, some of them were cleaned up on the outside. Like the dog, some of them were cleaned up temporarily on the inside and actually felt better. But in no case had they become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). They thought they were free from their problems and sins, when really they were still in bondage to an old sinful nature.

According to 2 Peter 2:20, these apostates “escaped the pollutions of the world.” Pollution is defilement on the outside. But true believers have “escaped the corruption that is in the world through [because of] lust” (2 Peter 1:4). Corruption is much deeper than defilement on the outside: it is decay on the inside. True believers have received a new nature, a divine nature, and they have new and different appetites and desires. They have been transformed from pigs and dogs into sheep!

Imagine the disappointment of the person who thinks he has been delivered, only to discover that, in the end, he is in worse shape than when he started! The apostates promise freedom, but all they can give is bondage. True freedom must come from within; it has to do with the inner nature of the person. Because the true nature of a thing is the highest that it can become, a pig and dog can never rise higher than *Sus scrofa* and *Canis familiaris*.

I realize that there are some who believe that these apostate teachers were true believers who, in turning from the knowledge of Christ, forfeited their salvation. Even a casual reading of 2 Peter 2 and Jude would convince the impartial reader that these teachers never had a true

experience of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Peter would never have compared them to swine and dogs had they once been members of the Lord's true flock, nor would he have called them "cursed children" (2 Peter 2:14). If they were true believers who had gone astray, it would have been Peter's responsibility to encourage his readers to rescue these backsliders (James 5:19–20), but Peter did not command them to do so. Instead, he condemned the apostates in some of the most forceful language found in the New Testament!

Now we better understand why this "freedom" offered by these teachers is a *false* freedom, a "freedom" that only leads to bondage. It is based on false promises, empty words that sound exciting but that have no divine authority behind them. It is offered by false Christians who were involved in a false experience. From start to finish, this "freedom" is the product of our adversary, the devil!

Now we can appreciate Peter's admonition in 2 Peter 1:10—"Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure." In other words, "Has your spiritual experience been genuine?" It is a startling fact that there are many people in our churches who have never truly been born again, but who are convinced that they are saved and going to heaven! They have had "an experience," and perhaps look better (like the sow) and feel better (like the dog), but they have not been *made better* as "partakers of the divine nature."

Perhaps Peter recalled Judas, one of the Twelve, who was a tool of the devil and was never born again. Up to the very end, the other disciples did not know the truth about Judas and thought he was a spiritual man!

The apostates appear to have successful ministries, but in the end, they are bound to fail.

The important thing is that you and I have the assurance of a true experience with the Lord, and that we have nothing to do with these counterfeit ministries, no matter how popular they may be.

Christ is "the truth" (John 14:6) and following Him leads to freedom. The apostates are liars and following them leads to bondage. There can be no middle ground!

Raymer, R. M. (1985). 1 Peter. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures (Vol. 2, pp. 848-855). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

5. THEY ARE MERCENARY (2:15–16)

2:15–16. Here Peter invoked a fourth Old Testament illustration, but this time he moved from Genesis to Numbers (chaps. 22–24). These false prophets were like animals (2 Peter 2:12), and their prototype, **Balaam son of Beor**, was reproved by an animal (Num. 22:28, 30). In addition to his mercenary mentality (he **loved the wages** [*misthon*] **of wickedness** [*adikias*]; cf. the same Gr. words in 2 Peter 2:13), Balaam actually urged the Moabites to trick Israelite men into illicit relationships with Moabite women, thereby introducing immorality into the camp (Num. 31:16; cf. Num. 25:1–3; Rev. 2:14). The **donkey ... spoke** (*phthenxamenon*, "was making a sound"; also used in 2 Peter 2:18), stopping **the** prophet in his **madness** (*paraphronian*, lit., "being apart or away from right thinking"; used only here in the NT). A mere donkey, a dumb animal, was smarter than Balaam! The false teachers, like Balaam, had sinned so long and so intensely that their sin had become a form of insanity. Also today many people have so thoroughly given themselves over to avarice and debauchery that their lifestyles are spiritually insane. Money and

sex (even in the name of religion) continue to bring spiritual ruin to many people. This is “the error of Balaam” (Jude 11), his **way** which is diverse from **the straight way**.

C. *Destruction by false teachers (2:17–22)*

Though the ultimate judgment of heretics is assured, Peter wrote as he did because of the damage they continued to wreak in the church. Certain types of people seemed to be especially selected for recruitment by false teachers. Having explained the avenues of God’s *deliverance* from ungodly people and offered a vivid *description* of false teachers, Peter now explained the *destruction* that such false teaching can bring into the church.

1. THE TARGETS OF DESTRUCTION (2:17–18)

2:17–18. The “accursed brood” (v. 14) is able to make an impact because of the deceptive nature of its approach and the vulnerability of its targets. False teachers **are springs without water and mists driven by a storm** (cf. Jude 12–13). In both cases one would look for some benefit or blessing (a cool drink from the spring; a refreshing shower from the clouds) but in each case he is disappointed. The very nature of hypocrisy is that one does not have what he pretends to have. Once again (cf. 2 Peter 2:1, 3, 9, 12–13) Peter wrote of their coming judgment. The **blackest darkness** (lit., “blackness” or “gloominess” [*zophos*; cf. “gloomy” in v. 4] of darkness) **is reserved for them** (cf. Jude 13). This blackness is presumably hell. As in the propagation of all heresy, human speech is the weapon that false teachers aim at their targets: **they mouth** (*phthengomenoi*, “make a sound”; also used in 2 Peter 2:16) **empty** (*mataiotētos*, “futile, worthless, without results”; cf. Eph. 4:17) **boastful** (*hyeronka*, “swollen”; still another *hapax legomenon* by Peter) **words**. Such high-sounding words by which they sought to impress and deceive people were actually worthless, being no different from the sound a donkey makes! These false teachers sought to lure the unstable **by appealing to** (*deleazousin*, “baiting, enticing,” also used in 2 Peter 2:14) **the lustful** (*aselgeiais*; cf. v. 7) **desires of sinful human nature**. The teachers themselves were licentious and they tried to encourage Christians to be the same.

Such propaganda and sensual license appeals to some people who are **just** learning the gospel and weighing its claim on their lives. The enticed **people who are ... escaping from those who live** (lit., “are constantly living,”) **in error** are not believers, according to most commentators. Some Bible students, however, say the ones enticed by the heretics are already converts to Christ, who by their conversions have recently escaped from their pagan companions who live in falsehood.

2. THE TECHNIQUES OF DESTRUCTION (2:19)

2:19. The techniques of false teachers are only workable with the naive, for the heretics are like a 300-pound man selling diet books—**they promise ... freedom** but are **themselves** hopelessly enslaved by **depravity** (John 8:34–36). Their empty and boastful promises of liberty are reminiscent of Satan’s words to Eve (Gen. 3:5). Slavery is not merely chattel ownership but is the mastery of one’s will by any person, idea, or substance (Rom. 6:16; 1 Cor. 6:12b).

3. THE TERMINATION OF DESTRUCTION (2:20–22)

Of whom are these verses speaking? Four views are possible.

(1) Some suggest that the word “they” refers to the false teachers rather than the targets of their attack (e.g., Edwin A. Blum, “2 Peter” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12:282).

(2) But the connection between the end of verse 18 (“people who are just escaping from those who live in error”) and the beginning of verse 20 (“if they have escaped the corruption of the world”) seems to favor a reference to the unstable, unsaved people who were “listeners” of the gospel (v. 18).

(3) Others think the reference might encompass both the false teachers and their “converts,” who can lose their salvation. This, however, runs counter to many passages that assure believers of eternal salvation.

(4) Another view is that *new* believers are warned against being “caught up into a life of carnality ... only to find that there is even less pleasure, less fulfillment than before they were saved” (Duane A. Dunham, “An Exegetical Study of 2 Peter 2:18–22,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140. January=March, 1983:51).

2:20–21. Whether **they** in verse 20 refers to the teachers or their victims, both groups had available to them knowledge about **Jesus Christ**, which could produce liberty and life. But when that knowledge was rejected, their end was deeper corruption (**again entangled in it and overcome**) and presumably a more severe degree of punishment. Indeed, they **would have been better off never to have known** the gospel, **the way of righteousness**, and **the sacred (holy) commandment** (i.e., the apostolic message) **than to have known** the truth **and** have deliberately violated it.

2:22. Jews considered both dogs and pigs among the lowest of creatures (cf. Matt. 7:6) so Peter chose these animals to describe people who knew the truth and turned away from it. The first proverb, **A dog returns to its vomit**, is taken from Proverbs 26:11. The second proverb, **A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud**, was presumably commonly known by Jews in the first century. The underlying principle of both is the same: these apostates (whether false teachers, their victims, or both) never were what they seemed to be and returned to what they had been all along. Dogs and pigs can be scrubbed but not kept clean, for it is in their very nature to return to unclean living. Such apostates are in a tighter bondage, they are farther from the truth, and they are deeper in spiritual filth than ever before.

Believers today do well to heed Peter’s warning against false teachers, to learn how to discern truth for themselves, and to teach it to others. The false teachers will themselves meet destruction and others will be destroyed by them. But Christians can wage spiritual warfare more effectively if they know their spiritual enemies, the techniques that heretics use, and the end result of their deception.