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2 Peter 2:1–22

False prophets

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-22/fake-news-facebook-quiz/8045158>

These are 4 news headlines up on the screen that were on the internet, but only one of them is real. Can you pick which one? The real article is Stop Pretending You Don't Know Why People Hate Hillary Clinton all the other 3 although put up on the internet are fake. Interestingly though The fake Pope Francis article was the most popular story on Facebook for the three months leading up to the US election. It had about a million shares, reactions and comments.

Have you heard of the phrase “fake news”? This term has been popularised recently by US president Donald Trump. It refers to journalism that consists of deliberate misinformation or hoaxes. It intentionally aims to mislead often in order to gain financially or politically, often with sensationalist, exaggerated, or patently false headlines that grabs attention. Its actually been around since the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century. For as long as there has been news there have been people offering fake stories. The International Federation of Library Associations even put out this guide to help people spot fake news. Its so serious that Facebook says it is taking steps to weed out phony news articles after widespread criticism that fake or misleading news helped swing the US election to Donald Trump. Ideas from Facebook include posting warning labels on false content and programming smarter algorithms to detect fake news. Like Google, it has started banning fake news sites from making money through its advertising network.

Why are these big corporations taking this so seriously? Its because News is important, it can influence people, it informs part of our daily lives, it is important for us to understand what is and isn't “fake news”. Well, it should be the same with our faith. Just like there is “fake news” there can be a “fake gospel”, a message that is incorrect and deceiving spread by False teachers. And just like we need to be careful as we read or hear news stories, we need to be careful when it comes to believing what we hear about the Bible and about our Christian faith. So is there a handy guide like the one the Librarians put out for us and our faith? Well not exactly, but we do have a chapter here in 2 Peter 2 where Peter looks at what a False Teacher will look like and the consequences of False Teaching. We are going to have a look at that and then briefly look at how all this affects us today.

False prophets and teachers have been around since the Old Testament. In the New testament (Matt 24) Jesus warns about false teachers during end times. Throughout church history there has been false teachers, whether in the early church, during Reformation and even now.

We see that Peter is concerned with this as well, last week we heard Peter say that we have true teachers who we should listen to, the apostles (1:16–18), and that the Old Testament was written by true prophets (1:19–21), Peter now in chapter 2 is warning his readers that just as there were also false prophets in the OT, so there will be false teachers today.

Signs of a false Prophet/teacher

So what are the signs of a false teacher? Its interesting to see that the main way Peter identifies these false teachers is not through their teachings but through their actions. I can think of 2 reasons he might do this; firstly because sometimes it can be hard to tell if a certain teaching is false, did you notice in verse 1 that their destructive teaching is secretly introduced, so a false teacher is sneaky so it can be easier to identify false teachers by their actions. Just like you should be able to tell a Christian by the fruits of what they do, for the false teachers their depraved conduct is the fruit of what they do.

Secondly Peter may not have highlighted some of their teachings as there are some teachings where there is freedom for a Christian in the different ways that we seek to obey God. For example, in the NT there is some flexibility in how they dealt with meat sacrificed to idols and for us today how we practice baptism, some do infant baptism, others do adult baptism, neither is false teaching.

Having said that Peter does identify one important teaching that the False Teachers have been saying which is crucial to the Christian gospel. You see it in verse 1 where he says that they even deny the sovereign Lord. Jesus is always a non-negotiable in the Christian faith. We can have differences on some teachings but not on who Jesus is and what he does for us. You see, Jesus is the only way we are saved, his death and resurrection as both Man and God are what makes us Christian. If someone is teaching something other than that, then it is a fake gospel and they are false teachers.

So having briefly looked at a teaching that can identify a false teacher what are the actions that we should look out for? Well, I think they can be summed up under two headings Greed and sexual immorality. I think verse 14 does a good job summing this up, " With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are experts in greed—an accursed brood!"

It's not surprising that Peter focuses on these 2 actions as they are the two most commonly talked about sins in the New Testament and I think they are just as relevant to us today. We need to be careful to avoid greed and sexual immorality and we need to watch for it in our teachers and our leaders.

I think we spend quite a bit of time mentioning sexual sins when we preach and it is something for most of us that we can identify when sex is something that goes against God's word, so I don't want to spend extra time now talking about that but I do think sometimes we sometimes struggle to identify greed and we talk about it less in sermons and when being critical of our teachers and leaders. I think there are a few reasons for that, firstly for a lot of us it can hit too close to home, we may be struggling with greed and not want to face it ourselves. Secondly it can be hard to identify greed. Sexual sins seem far more absolute, black and white, while greed seems to fall into the grey area. How do we identify greed? Is it just if someone is wealthy? Well, I hope not because everyone here could be identified as wealthy when looking at it from a global perspective. The average wealth here is far higher than in many other countries. Greed, you see, is primarily a sin of motivation. That is why it's harder to identify. One person may buy a tv and give a certain amount of money to church each week and another person may buy the same tv and give the same amount of money and one of those people may be greedy and the other not. So what is the identifier of greed? It actually goes back to the teaching of the false prophets. "They promise freedom" it says in verse 19. They encourage satisfying your own desires, if it feels good do it, the most important person is you, they say. Peter equates them to animals, simply reacting on instinct. Of course this message is often mixed with gospel sounding words or part truths of the gospel but in the end there is a clear difference between this fake gospel and the true gospel. And it goes back to the point I made at the beginning, Jesus. Is Jesus your Lord and master or as it says in verse 19 are they slaves to whatever has mastered them. If someone is motivated by simply fulfilling their own desires with money, if what drives them is simply what makes them feel good then it is wrong, it is greed. Serving Jesus, having him as Lord of your life is right.

So what happens to these False Teachers? What consequences do they face?

Consequences of false Prophet/teacher

Peter answers that right from the beginning of the chapter, they will face swift destruction. You may be wondering how that can be? After all we see false teachers both here and overseas and they aren't being struck down by lightning bolts from heaven. Some of them even seem to be doing quite well for themselves. Well swift here is not referring to how quickly they will be punished after committing the sin it is referring to the speed at which the destruction will come when it starts, the certainty of that judgement.

Peter gives us some insights into this judgement from the Old Testament in verse 4-10. The fallen angels in verse 4 shows that no one is exempt from being judged and that the judgement although real may be delayed, the flood story in verse 5 shows that although all will be judged you can be protected and the story of Lot in verse 6-8 shows that judgement will lead to destruction.

Other than judgement, Peter also implies that the consequence of false teachers is that many will follow them. Verse 14 describes it as seducing the unstable. This actually contrasts with what we saw in chapter 1 which describes Christians as firmly established in the truth. You are unstable if you aren't reminded about what Jesus has done for you, we need to be reminded that he is our Lord and Saviour.

So what about us today? Is this something we need to worry about? Do we need to worry about false teachers who show greed and sexual immorality? Do we need to worry that we are one of the unstable that could be seduced? Lets talk about that in my last point.

False teaching and us today

I guess the first question we can ask is do we have false teachers today? Absolutely. First of all it makes me think of Namibia where Ben and Penny are going. As part of them trying to raise funds to go they have been showing a presentation about Namibia. I have been lucky enough to see it and one of the things that really struck me is how many false teachers there are in Namibia, you see that in the headlines from Namibia that are on the screen. As I prepared this sermon it was striking how familiar the description Peter gave is to what is happening in Namibia. The so called ministers show their greed as they take advantage of people to steal their homes and their money and promiscuity and adultery are a common problem there. Namibia definitely has false teachers today.

Closer to home it reminds me of some of the experiences I have had as a young adult visiting different churches even here in Sydney. I remember going to one church where I was told by the minister that by giving money to the church I would be blessed in this lifetime and that it would ensure my salvation. At another church I went to with a new friend, the emphasis was on experience and I was told by my friend that she only feels truly saved when she starts speaking in tongues and collapses in the spirit. Both of these things twist the truth of the gospel. Both appeal to us because it makes us feel good. The first example takes the power of salvation away from Jesus and puts it with me, with the money I give. The second example takes salvation from Jesus and puts it in an experience to feel. Both of these are fake gospels. I am not saying that giving money to the church or speaking in tongues is wrong, but if they start becoming more important than Jesus then they are part of a fake gospel. This is so serious that Peter compares it to vomit and mud.

But as serious as it is, I don't want you to go away from this talk feeling depressed or scared. Having false teachers in the church is serious but it is not disastrous. We see that in the OT examples that Peter gave where both Noah and Lots families were saved from judgement. I also think the key verse for all of chapter 2 is in verse 9 where it says "the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment on the day of judgment." You see as much as God is in control of judgement and punishment for the false teachers he also promises to rescue the godly from trials. It reminds me of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And

God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.”

It doesn't mean we can sit back and be passive about the risk of false teaching, that's why we have warnings like this and others in the Bible, but it does mean that we can be confident in God's control of the situation. It should encourage us to turn to God's word as Peter says in chapter one so we can be reminded of what Jesus has done and be established in the truth. One of the reasons that false teaching is so prevalent in Namibia is the lack of access and understanding of God's word. God's word, the Bible helps Christians know the truth. This should also encourage us to support people like Ben and Penny who's primary focus is equipping and training Christians overseas so that they will not be seduced by false teaching and instead acknowledge our sovereign Lord Jesus. The more that we know God's word, the more that we read the Bible we will be able to be able to measure what our leaders and teachers say and it will enable us to figure out what is a fake gospel and what is a saving gospel.

Amen