

2ND PETER

A VERSE BY VERSE STUDY THROUGH PETER'S SECOND EPISTLE

SESSION OBJECTIVE: 2 PETER 2:12-22

To understand the characteristics of false teachers.

Red Flags

You've probably heard the phrase, "to raise a red flag." It's a phrase that began to be used in the 19th century, but a specific origin point is hard to pin down. There are several points of influence. In auto racing, a red flag is issued to notify drivers that the race has been stopped, indicating something has gone wrong (e.g. a wreck, weather, etc.). Red flags have also been used to warn the public of live fire exercises in progress by the armed forces, and they are sometimes flown by ships carrying munitions. It can also be used to issue a warning of danger, most infamously demonstrated by Mexican General Santa Anna in the battle of the Alamo. The red flag signaled to his opposition that no quarter would be given to those who surrender after the fight began (a proposition on which Santa Anna followed through). Though these are all varying in context, they all indicate the same thing: *"Something is wrong, pay attention, or it could affect you."*

Following last week's study on the reality of false teachers, this week we will examine some of the characteristics of false teachers, and in a way, these characteristics could be seen as red flags for Christians. In other words, if you notice these behaviors consistently in a person claiming to be a teacher of God's word, it should make you think: *"Something is wrong, pay attention, or it could affect me."*

The Characteristics of False Teachers

Verse 12 through 17 are primarily descriptions that Peter gives us of these false teachers. He uses both practical descriptions and also some colorful imagery to illustrate what they are like. Below is a breakdown of

the different phrases and concepts that Peter presents here, with an explanation of what is being communicated.

IRRATIONAL

The false teachers that Peter was opposing thought very highly of themselves, for they, “do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties” (2 Pet. 2:10). This, in opposition to good angels, “who are greater in might and power,” don’t engage in the same kind of behavior though they are more qualified to do so. These false teachers thought that they were strong when in actuality, they were weak. Peter concludes, then, that they are not wise but are like, “unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct to be captured and killed” (2 Pet. 2:12). The word for, “unreasoning,” is the Greek word ἄλογος (alogos), and it means, “without speech or reason.” To put it another way, they are like dumb animals who cannot sense danger when it is upon them and are destined to be caught and killed as a result.

The idea here is that they are unaware in two different ways. For one, they are unaware of their own error. They don’t see a problem with what they teach or how they act. In fact, “they count it a pleasure to revel in the day time” (2 Pet. 2:13). They have reached such a point of depravity that they are not only unaware of their error, but even celebrate their own wrongdoing. In Romans 1:32, Paul says it this way: “Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” Secondly, they are unaware of the destruction that awaits them as a result of their unrepentant evil ways (2 Pet. 2:12). Peter even describes them as, “those whom the black darkness has been reserved” (2 Pet. 2:17), a clear allusion to the same place the evil, fallen angels have been relegated to (2 Pet. 2:4).

IMMORAL

Beyond their irrationality, they are clearly immoral. In verse 13 it says, “they carouse with you.” The word in Greek for, “carouse” is συνευχέω (suneuchoeo), and it means, “to feast together.” Most scholars believe this is a charge against these false teachers for using the Lord’s Supper to gluttonously stuff themselves, rather than sharing it with reverence. They also have, “eyes full of adultery,” a charge that indicates that they were lustful towards the women in their midst, and likely, “enticed” them into perverse acts.

Later they are described by their, “fleshly desires, by sensuality” (2 Pet. 2:18). Both of these words also indicate sin that is sexual in nature. The word for, “desires,” is the Greek word ἐπιθυμία (epithumia), and it means, “an intense desire.” Usually in a negative context, it means more like, “an irregular or violent desire.” Coupled with the word sensuality, it clearly has a sexually immoral aspect to it. The word for, “sensuality,” is the Greek word ἀσέλγεια (aselgeia), and this word means, “outrageous actions.” In other words, these false teachers exhibited the kind of lustful disposition that led to unchecked sinful action.

IDOLATROUS

Even worse, they are idolatrous. Peter says that they, “have gone astray” (2 Pet. 2:15). This is common terminology used to describe someone who has been carried away from the truth of God and into theological error. It conjures imagery of Israel, going wayward into the wilderness. In fact, Peter even uses some Old Testament imagery from the book of Numbers, although he uses the biblical example in a curious manner. He mentions, “Balaam, son of Beor,” but for very specific reasons. For one, even Balaam’s donkey was aware of what God was doing, and Balaam was not. This demonstrates that he was like, “an unreasoning animal,” like Peter mentioned above. Two, the narrator in Numbers suggests that Balaam’s intentions were impure and that he desired financial reward (Num. 21:15-20). Interestingly, God still used Balaam to bless Israel though Balaam desired the exact opposite. Perhaps this is an underhanded way of saying that God can still bring

blessing to His people through false teachers, demonstrating sovereign power over them. Either way, these false teachers led the people of God away and into idolatry.

ILLEGITIMATE

Last, they are illegitimate Christians. In other words, they aren't saved. Peter says in verse 21, "For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them." These are shocking words but with practical importance. The reality is that it is much more difficult to reclaim someone who has walked away from the faith than someone who has no working knowledge of it. However, I would add the words of St. John to this discussion as a means to help us better understand what it truly means when a false teacher, much less a regular Christian, walks away from the faith: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 Jn. 2:19). John makes an argument that I think is congruent with our current discussion: people who walk away from Christianity do not *lose their salvation*, but rather *reveal they were never actually saved*. They become like, "a dog that returns to its own vomit."

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read 2 Peter 2:12-13. What are false teachers like? Why is this ironic (Hint: Read verse 10)? What do they take pleasure in?

2. Read 2 Peter 2:14-15. In your own words, describe how false teachers are described in these two verses.

Day Two

1. Read 2 Peter 2:16. Who is Balaam, and why is he mentioned? What are the two connections that Peter is likely making to him with regard to false teachers?

2. Read 2 Peter 2:17. What does the black darkness likely refer to, and where else have we seen this kind of imagery? (Hint: See above notes)

Day Three

1. Read 2 Peter 2:18-19. In your own words, describe how false teachers are described in these two verses.

2. Read 2 Peter 2:20. What does it mean that, “the last state has become worse for them than the first?”
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Day Four

1. Read 2 Peter 2:21. Why is it harder to speak to someone who has walked away from the faith than someone who has never been introduced to it? Read 1 John 2:19. What does them walking away indicate?
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2. Read 2 Peter 2:22. What do the two proverbs mean in this context?
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Week 6 Discussion: Red Flags

In 2 Peter 2:12-22, we learn of some red flags that should warn us that someone claiming to be a teacher or preacher sent from God is really a false teacher. They are irrational in their thoughts and behaviors, immoral, leading people away from the truth of God’s word, and in actuality not really born again (and thus even more difficult to speak truth to). However, it could be argued that they are not just red flags for false teachers, but for all Christians. Talk as a group about these red flags in your own lives.

1. Icebreaker: Of these four red flags, which do you feel is the one you would wrestle with the most? Why?
2. How common is it for you to begin thinking irrationally when you are caught up in sin? Why do you think this is the case? How do you break out of this irrational thinking?
3. How can you as a Christian fight against immorality in your own life?
4. How do you prevent your flesh from directing your life away from the truth of God? What practices can you engage in to keep you on track?
5. Have you ever known someone who walked away from the faith? Why do you think they did that? How hard is it to speak to them about the truth of God? More or less difficult than a non-believer who has no prior experience with Christianity?
6. How important is gentleness and compassion when calling attention to these red flags in another individual? In other words, should they be dealt with bluntly, or is there a right and wrong way to engage that person?

Takeaways:

1. Peter describes some red flags that can help identify a false teacher.
2. False teachers are marked by irrational thought, immoral living, idolatrous practices, and are illegitimate Christians.

PRAYER REQUESTS: