

Sermon 10, False Prophecy, False Teaching, 2 Peter 2:1

Read Jeremiah 28, Numbers 12

Proposition: God's people are under attack from false teachers, and this is nothing new.

- I. False Prophets in the OT Era, v. 1a
 - A. They arose among the people
 - B. They sought to protect legitimate goods
 - C. They generally held official positions
 - D. They did not speak with divine authority
 - E. They preached peace and safety instead of judgment
 - F. They were condemned to punishment by God³
- II. False Teachers in our own era, v. 1b
 - A. Their Name: Teachers who teach lies
 - B. Their Activity
 1. Introducing destructive sects
 2. Denying their Master
 - C. Their Fate: Swift destruction
- III. Application
 - A. Don't believe the false teachers
 - B. Don't support the false teachers
 - C. Don't be a false teacher
 - D. Affirm your Master

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last week what a true prophet looks like. Essentially, he speaks from God as he is carried along by the Holy Spirit. Prophecy is not a result of the prophet's own interpretation of things. But here's the thing: fake news, fake prophecy, appeared right alongside the real prophecy that was going on in that era. Yes, holy men of God spoke — but so did unholy servants of Satan who were pretending to be true prophets! So Peter transitions from his account of true prophecy to his warning against false prophecy and false teaching that's going to occupy the rest of this chapter. The point is simple: There will be false teachers among us. This is nothing new, but it is something risky and destructive. Don't be surprised by false teachers, and don't believe their falsehoods!

I. False Prophets in the OT Era, v. 1a

False prophets arose among the people. We saw one example of such a false prophet in the story of Jeremiah's interchange with Hananiah, but there are many others, particularly in the book of Jeremiah. Interestingly, the Hebrew Bible never labels some individual as a "false prophet." Both

³ These last three points come from Bauckham, *in loc* (pg. 238).

false and true prophets are simply called “prophets.” But the Greek translation of the Old Testament paraphrases with the same word for “false prophet” that’s used here in Second Peter in several places, particularly in Jeremiah. Brothers and sisters, God’s people have always been troubled with false prophets. Perhaps the first instance of false prophecy troubling God’s people is the case of Miriam and Aaron asserting their authority over against that of Moses and arguing that God had spoken through them too. God dealt swiftly with that one: He sharply rebuked them and made Miriam leprous for a week. In this incident, brothers and sisters, I think we can discern one huge way in which the problem of false teachers manifests itself within our circles.

Have you ever been in a church where a certain faction, under the leadership perhaps of an office-bearer or the wife/mother/sister of an office-bearer, has made a move to grab power? Maybe even with some legitimacy? Of course God had spoken to Aaron at times. It’s recorded in Leviticus. And Miriam was Moses’ big sister, the one who watched him be scooped up by Pharaoh's daughter all those years before. (That was literally a century before the events narrated in Numbers 12.) The faction is not composed of dogs and swine, but of legitimate, godly people who have something of a genuine grievance with how things are done. And they air their grievance by claiming that in some sense God has spoken through them as well, that their voice should matter within the church, and a number of other bromides, platitudes, and truisms that no one can responsibly disagree with.

Anyway, brothers and sisters, the biggest danger of a sermon like this, and of the sermons following this one through the rest of 2 Peter 2, is that they will give the impression that false teaching is something “out there” that we must protect ourselves from. We like to think that it’s not something we’re guilty of, but rather something that victimizes us. That’s the impression I’ve taken away from the sermons on false teaching that I’ve heard in this town — purely a “watch out for the bad people out there” mentality. But brothers and sisters, the history of false prophets within the people of God in the OT era shows us that this mentality is radically incomplete. Are there bad people out there who want to lie to us? Of course! But are they the major threat to us or to any church? Of course not! The main way false teaching is going to manifest itself in our congregation is the way that it’s always manifested itself in every congregation. That will be the way of seduction, not the way of frontal attack. False teachers are going to appeal to good things, things we recognize as good, and they are going to present a very strong case for how their ideas will safeguard those goods better than the ideas of the true teachers. Brothers and sisters, Miriam and Aaron didn’t stand up and say “Hey-hey, ho-ho, our brother has got to go!” They simply wanted their fair share of the pie! And Aaron was the high priest; what was Moses’ official position? He wasn’t the king; he wasn’t the judge; he doesn’t appear to have had any official title. He was just the one in charge. Anyhow, I think the story is clear. Miriam and Aaron weren’t interested in overthrowing Moses; they simply wanted him, as their little brother, to acknowledge their contributions to the leadership of the Israelites. They too had important words from God that the rest of the people needed to hear. And brothers and sisters, that is going to be how false teaching presents itself by and large within our church and other churches. It will not tell us that

everything we know is wrong. It will not approach with the statement that Jesus is terrible and should be despised. It will not tell us to burn down the church building and disband our fellowship. It will be a lot more subtle than that, and it will generally work by pitting established authority figures against one another, along the lines of Aaron against Moses. You see, the false prophets arose among the people! They grew up in church. They were pillars. They were there every time the doors were open. They had put in the sweat equity, built the relationships, done the ministry of walking with people through the decades. Jude warns against false teachers who came in from outside with a new message — and certainly that’s a possibility too. But Peter is specifically directing our attention to the false prophets who were part of God’s people. Think of Hananiah; he seems to have been recognized in Jerusalem, and if he wasn’t an official court prophet, then at least he was thought of as a legitimate prophet by the authorities. And so it is with us. The fact that someone holds an office in the church is not a guarantee that he’s a true teacher or a safe guide. The fact that someone is a fixture around the place doesn’t mean that he’s a safe guide. Aaron was the legitimate high priest, chosen by God Himself, ordained by Moses — and acting as a false prophet.

A. They did not speak with divine authority

Well, three other characteristics of these false prophets — and these go for both the false prophets who were longstanding community members and the other kind of false prophets, the itinerant teachers who came out of nowhere and began telling plausible falsehoods — are that they didn’t speak with the authority of God, they promised peace and safety instead of the judgment threatened by the real prophets, and they were condemned and punished by God.

The first of these is the most important. A false prophet is anyone who says “This is what God says” when God didn’t really say it. They don’t speak with divine authority. In our Numbers passage, Miriam and Aaron were implying that because God had spoken to them, they should have just as much authority. They were effectively implying, even if not outright saying, that God wanted them to have as much authority as Moses. Other false prophets, of course, will go even farther and directly contradict the message that is actually from God. Hananiah is one such. He opposed Jeremiah by saying “God will break the yoke and deliver us from Babylon.” But actually, of course, the opposite was true.

B. They preached peace and safety instead of judgment

In other words, brothers and sisters, the error of the false prophets was not merely a formal error — that the words they were saying were not in fact from God, even though they purported to be. That alone is enough to establish the falsehood of a false teaching, but in addition, the content of this teaching is false too.

We can recognize false teaching today whenever it tells us that God is not mad, God’s not angry, God will not judge or condemn. Actually, of course, God will judge, as Peter emphasizes heavily through the rest of this book. Anyone who tells you that the Last Judgment and the doctrine of Hell have all been a big mistake is a false prophet.

C. They were condemned to punishment by God

Well, finally, God punished these false prophets in the OT era. He struck Miriam with leprosy. He killed Hananiah outright. And in the same way, He continues to threaten false prophets with His eternal wrath.

So that's a brief summary of OT false prophets. They usually came from within the community of God's people, and generally from a highly respected position within it. They often had a legitimate position and sought to defend a legitimate good. And they primarily revealed themselves by preaching peace and safety instead of judgment.

II. False Teachers in our own era, v. 1b

Well, Peter goes on to tell us that there will be false teachers arising in our church communities too. There is nothing new about this. This is simply to be expected from everything we know about the nature of the church. The church is an institution that attracts false teachers!

A. Their Name: Teachers who teach lies

Well, let's consider them first of all by their name. Though "false teacher" is a buzzword in the church today, this is the only appearance of the word in the Bible. It seems to be Peter's coinage, on the model of pseudo-prophet. The Greek word is "pseudo-teachers." That is, their name is a joining together of the words for "teaching" and "lies." They teach lies! They assert as truth things that are actually not true. And they don't just *tell* lies; they teach lies. That is, they inculcate these falsehoods into a set of willing pupils over some length of time. This is worse than simply being a liar; it is asserting lies from a position of trust and authority. Again, then, brothers and sisters, we see the point made: these people are to be found within the church as trusted teachers. They are not primarily bad people out there; they are people in here, and they are leaders who have the opportunity and ability to teach!

B. Their Activity

Now, Peter describes their activity. They do two things in particular.

1. Introducing destructive schools of thought

First, they introduce destructive schools of thought. The translation of this phrase is wrong in almost all English Bibles. Yes, Peter uses the word *haireseis*, from which we derive our word "heresy." But the Greek word *haireseis* didn't mean what our word "heresy" means today. It meant a faction, a party, a school of thought. Hence Peter's adjective "destructive." Any Christian today would know that someone who's teaching heresy is teaching destructive heresy; that's almost by definition. But some factions are more harmful than others; some schools of thought are more evil than others. And these false teachers teach things that are outright destructive, things that tear down the body. In particular, it would seem from ch. 3 that Peter is talking about people who deny the second coming and the final judgment. Those people formed a faction that was going to rip the church apart. They weren't "secretly" doing this; they were just doing it. By extension, of course, any destructive opinion, party, or sect can be led by a "false teacher" in the Petrine sense. Aaron was being a false teacher, leading a harmful faction, when he sought to supplant Moses' authority. An associate pastor who's looking to overthrow

the senior pastor is being a false teacher. And, of course, a man in the church who's teaching that the Ten Commandments don't apply to Christians is yet another false teacher, as is a pastor who teaches that homosexuality is a normal, God-blessed identity and way of life.

So the false teachers can be known by the content of what they say. It is false — false to the teaching of Scripture, and false to the rightful channels of authority.

2. Denying their Master

But the false teachers do something else too. They deny the Master who bought them. What does this mean? To deny your master is essentially to be a slave who refuses to recognize his master's authority. It is to say, "Who's that? I don't know him." That's what denying your master means. In this case, of course, it means to deny Christ. One would think that this would be kind of a sore subject for Peter. He denied his Master three times. You and I deny Him every time we sin. But Peter is not just thinking of smaller denials like these, denials that we turn from in disgust with repentance in our hearts. He is thinking of hard-core, definite, un-repented denials. These people reject Christ, even while they generally like to keep His name and some of the externals of the faith. They deny the master who bought them. That is, they refuse to recognize Him and His authority, though generally they pretend to do so.

How can we do this? It's simple. We can say "Christians support gay rights." We can say "God wants me to be happy." We can say "I deserve to hold a grudge against so-and-so." And every time we say those things, brothers and sisters, we are false teachers denying our master. We are the people Peter is warning us against when we sin, because sin is the premier way of denying our master.

C. Their Fate: Swift destruction

Well, what happens to these teachers of destructive doctrines? They bring on themselves swift destruction. Even if the destruction seems to be delayed, it will not be delayed forever. It is, in fact, swift. From the perspective of eternity, it will not be long at all before these false teachers are destroyed by God. Now, this is not trying to teach annihilationism. The destruction in view is not specified here; from the rest of Scripture, we know that this destruction takes the form of eternal, conscious torment. And it will happen to any and every false teacher.

III. Application

So what do we do?

A. Don't believe the false teachers

Don't believe the false teachers. When they tell you falsehoods ("My authority is just as good as the senior pastor's authority; my liberal views on human sexuality are just as good as your conservative views on human sexuality; my gifts are just as important as the elders' and should be used as such"), don't believe them!

B. Don't support the false teachers

Don't support them, either. Don't buy their books. Don't join their factions. Don't allow their teaching to color your attitude toward Jesus Christ. Remember that you can deny Him not just by sinning, but also by following those who contradict His teaching. So don't support them with

moral support, with financial support, or with spiritual support. They are false teachers, and they are headed for destruction.

C. Don't be a false teacher

But finally, and most importantly, don't be a false teacher. Don't be someone who forms factions in the church. Don't be someone who insists on having everything your own way. Don't be someone who denies Christ.

Instead, affirm your master! What does that look like? It looks like worshipping Him. It looks like acknowledging Him. It looks like obeying Him, and being conformed to His way of thinking. It looks like obedience to the rightful authorities He has placed over you in the church. It looks like partaking of the Lord's Supper, in which you enthusiastically acknowledge that you belong to Christ. Brothers and sisters, the solution to false teaching is true teaching from true teachers. Christ is the preeminent true teacher. Trust Him, believe Him, learn from Him — and you will find not destruction, but salvation. Amen.