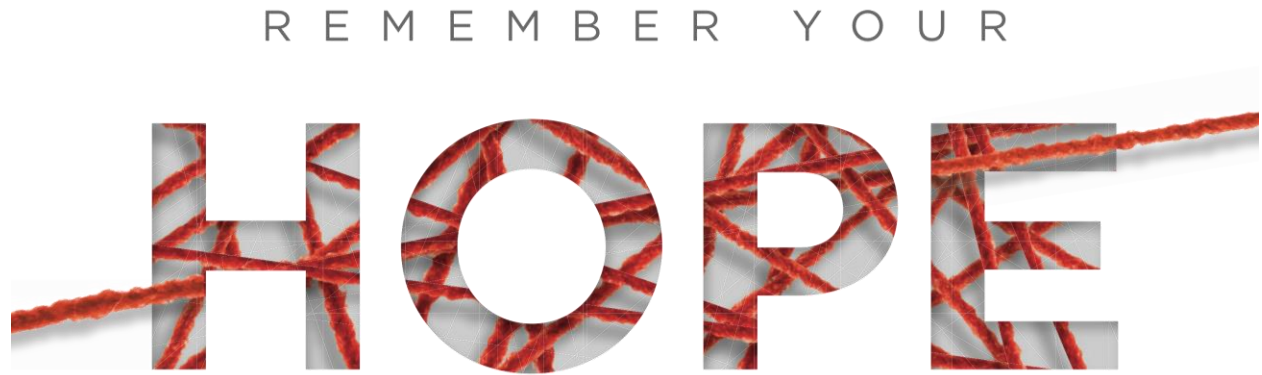


Lesson 4: 2 Peter 2:12–22

Hook



Main Point: These false teachers are not only wrong in their theology, they are wicked in their lifestyles.

Hook

In the 1920s, Charles Ponzi received an International Reply Coupon (IRC) in the mail that could be redeemed for priority postage stamps from another country. Ponzi soon realized he could make a profit by purchasing more of these IRCs and then exchanging them in other countries for higher valued stamps. Ponzi would hire several people to send him IRCs from around the world, then he would resell them for sometimes more than a 400 percent profit.ⁱ

Not content with the money he was making, Ponzi decided to bring in investors for his new business venture, promising them an unrealistic return on their investments in a short period of time. His scheme got even worse when, rather than paying his investors with the profit he was making reselling stamps, Ponzi used his investors' money to pay new investors, thus manipulating his returns.

Ponzi became very rich with his scheme and lived a life of luxury until he was arrested and charged with 86 counts of mail fraud.ⁱⁱ Ponzi spent 14 years in prison; his wife divorced him, and he died penniless in 1949.ⁱⁱⁱ His fraudulent operation has often been referred to as the “Ponzi scheme,” and that is a term still used today for many deceitful business ventures.

Q. Why do you suppose so many investors trusted Charles Ponzi with their money?

Q. What qualities should we look for in the people we follow?

Q. What are the dangers of deceptive leaders in the Christian community? How can they affect someone's faith?

Transition: Today we will be studying the false teachers prevalent during the time of Peter's letter. These false teachers led others astray from correct Christian doctrine with their deceptive promises and lifestyles.

Book

Main Point: These false teachers are not only wrong in their theology, they are wicked in their lifestyles.

Text Summary: False teachers are like animals in their thinking – creatures of instinct, following the pleasures of the flesh rather than the Word of God. They have left the narrow path, like the false prophet Balaam who led people astray for money. Yet God will rebuke them as He did Balaam. The Church is called to confront these false teachers and, if they don't repent, to purge them from their midst so they don't bring others down with them and destroy the Church from within. These false teachers will destroy themselves with their own sin and be judged by God in the end.

2 Peter 2:12–14 [Read]

Talking Point 1: They are like animals in their thinking.

Q: What would your life be like if your goal were just to pursue your own pleasure?

Q: How is that different from what Scripture teaches us about worldview and purpose?

Peter was not gentle in his denouncement of these false teachers. Barclay calls this “a long passage of magnificent invective. Through it glows the fiery heat of flaming moral indignation.”^{iv} Like animals, they simply followed their instincts and fleshly desires rather than the Word of God (2:12). Peter's comments on false teachers are very similar to Jude 1:10 – “these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively,” just as the psalm writer, Asaph, said he had been toward God – “brutish and ignorant ... like a beast” (Psalm 73:22). These false teachers don't listen to the Word of God. They follow their natural desires and are destroyed by them. Whereas animals can't help following their instinct – they are “born to be caught and destroyed,” these false teachers should know better. They voluntarily sought their own destruction. The words *destroyed* and *destruction* are intentionally repeated for emphasis, as Peter often did throughout his letter. The implication is that, as animals are destroyed literally, the false teachers were destroyed morally.^v

What Peter said is not only religious truth, it is common sense. The pleasures of the body are subject to the law of diminishing returns. It takes more and more to satisfy your cravings and you are less and less able to enjoy them. Those who live in pursuit of fleshly desires will destroy themselves. Alcoholism raises your risk of getting cancer and can contribute to seizures, liver diseases, and brain damage. It can destroy your relationships, your mental health, and lead to violence, self-harm, car crashes, or other accidents.^{vi} Gluttony leads to obesity, which can cause diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, high cholesterol, stroke, gallstones, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, some cancers, mental illness, and shorter life span.^{vii} Sexual immorality can

destroy you physically, emotionally, and spiritually, as well as affect other people. ^{viii} The list goes on.

These false teachers were “blots and blemishes” on the Church (2:13), just like a blot or a blemish on an animal that made it unfit for sacrifice to God (Exodus 12:5). In fact, the wording used here is exactly the same as the phrase he used in 1 Peter 1:19 to refer to the perfection of the sacrifice of Jesus – “without blemish or spot.” Peter was making an intentional contrast between the way these false prophets were living and the holy lives in Christ that Peter himself had taught the people they were called to live in his first letter (1 Peter 1:13–21).^{ix}

They feasted with the Church even while they reveled in their deceptions (2:13). This refers to the practice of the love feast the early churches ate together before they celebrated the Lord’s Supper or in conjunction with it. The purpose of the love feast was for both rich and poor to share a large meal together. But in Corinth, the rich were bringing their own food and not sharing with the poor, so the whole purpose was ruined (1 Corinthians 11:21). The love feast was supposed to be a celebration of the unity of the family of God and the love and sacrifice of Christ. In this case, Peter said the false teachers were also ruining the love feast because of the great hypocrisy of their lifestyle, and that they were trying to deceive others with their false teaching (2:13). Their false teaching was tearing apart the unity of the church, and their sinful lifestyles blasphemed the name of Jesus (2:12).^x

With Peter’s strong description of them, it is surprising that any of the churches wouldn’t immediately recognize them as false teachers. Peter describes them as:

- indulging in lust of defiling passion (v. 10)
- despising authority (v. 10)
- bold and willful (v. 10)
- blaspheming (v. 12)
- reveling in their deceptions (v. 13)
- eyes full of adultery/lust (v. 14)
- insatiable appetite for sin (v. 14)
- hearts trained in greed (v. 14)

Though he had described them as being sneaky in their false teaching earlier, this was a bold condemnation. They were *full of sin*; they had *trained themselves* in it. Not only had they deluded themselves, they had brought others down with them. Everyone will be held responsible for his or her own sin, but those who lead others astray will be held responsible for those who follow them as well.^{xi} Peter concluded his description of the false teachers with a strong final judgment – “Accursed children!” This Hebrew phrase literally means “children of the curse,” referring to the curses of the Mosaic covenant, which describes those who would certainly be destroyed for their rejection of God’s law and desire to live their own way.^{xii} Peter did not mince words. He left no room for gray with these false teachers. They would bring

judgment upon themselves. The Church needed to confront them and, if they were unwilling to change, purge them from the fellowship so they didn't bring others down with them.

Q: In what ways are you tempted to pursue your own pleasure rather than centering your life on God's law and His kingdom?

Q: Give some real-life examples (without using names) of how you have seen people's sin destroy them, like alcoholism, greed, or something else.

Q: Why is it so easy for our sins to entangle us, to entrap us, to enslave us?

Q: If you were to see someone like this in our church, living in blatant sin, what should you do about it?

2 Peter 2:15–19 [Read]

Talking Point 2: They follow the wrong path and lead other people astray with them.

Q: What kinds of promises do these false teachers make to those they try to lead astray? Why are they empty promises?

Q: Why did Peter bring up the example of Balaam?

Balaam was a false prophet from Aram (Numbers 22–24) during the time when Israel wandered in the wilderness and defeated many other armies by the strength of the Lord. He was well-known for the effectiveness of his curses and blessings. He cursed or blessed whoever paid him for it (2:15). But when the king of Moab asked him to curse the Israelites, God intervened (2:16).

Balak, the king of Moab, afraid of the bigger, stronger Israelite army coming to invade him, hired Balaam to curse the people of Israel for him. When the elders of Moab went for him, Balaam had a vision in which God appeared to him and told him not to go with them. So Balaam refused. But Balak sent more princes and offered him whatever payment he wanted. Balaam still refused. But then God appeared to him again and said he could go, but he had to do whatever God told him to do. So he went with them, riding on his donkey.

Along the way, the angel of the Lord stood in the road blocking their way, a drawn sword in his hand. But only the donkey saw him. When the donkey ran off the road and into a field, Balaam struck it. The angel of the Lord stood before them in a narrow path between two walls of vineyards. The donkey pressed up against the wall, smashing Balaam's foot, so he struck it again. The angel blocked them again, and the donkey laid down in the path. Balaam struck it again. Then God made the donkey able to speak to Balaam and opened Balaam's eyes to see the angel of the Lord standing in his way. Balaam offered to turn back, but the angel of the Lord

told him to go with the men and say only what God told him to say. Balaam went on to Moab and each of the three times Balak asked him to curse Israel, Balaam blessed them instead, saying he could only speak the words God had given him.^{xiii}

People often point to this story as proof that God can speak through anyone, even a donkey. If God wants to get your attention, He will – through ordinary circumstances, a vision, an angel, or even a talking donkey. Peter was reminding the people that God was in control, and He would rebuke these false teachers just as He did Balaam.

Peter called these false teachers “waterless springs” and “mists driven by a storm.” Both metaphors say the same thing. These false teachers made promises of happiness and fulfillment in their lifestyle of pleasure, but their promises and their lives were empty and meaningless (2:18–19). The imagery of mist driven by the storm is the same as when Paul encouraged the Ephesians to grow into maturity in their faith so they would no longer be “carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). Those who have developed maturity in Christ are less likely to be swayed by the empty promises of false teachers. They are more likely to be able to recognize them for what they are, as Peter did. Peter said, “They entice unsteady souls” (2:14) and new believers (2:18) – those who are not firmly grounded in their faith. The call for us, then, is to ground ourselves in Christ, to grow into maturity in our faith, and to study God’s true teaching so we can recognize false teaching quickly and easily.^{xiv}

The false teachers promised freedom, but they were really slaves to their sin (2:19). True freedom is only found in Christ (Romans 6:18). The pleasure they were pursuing would end up destroying them. They were overcome and enslaved by their sin, the very thing they thought would make them so happy (2:19). Peter spoke again of their judgment – “For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved” (2:17). Again, he did not mince words. Peter was so strong in his condemnation because he was trying to save others from being led astray. He did not want his readers to be deceived. This was his final letter; this matter was of utmost importance to Peter. It was not just a matter of life and death; it was a matter of *eternal* life or death.

Q: Why is it important to confront false teachers in our midst? Why is this difficult for many churches to do?

MacArthur wrote,

When the church doesn’t deal properly with the spiritual contamination that false teachers can spread, the results can be disastrous. For example, the Lord told the church at Sardis, ‘I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead’ (Rev. 3:1). That was because only a few in Sardis had not ‘soiled their garments.’ The rest had indiscriminately embraced apostasy, which damned their souls and killed the church.... The spiritual survival and prosperity of us who love Christ, especially in times of growing apostasy, requires the utmost perseverance and care.... We must exercise bold discernment in taking

the offensive and reaching out to apostates and those influenced by their heresies. The Christian life has always been a pilgrimage and a spiritual battle.^{xv}

Every New Testament book except Philemon (which was written for a very specific situation) contains warnings about false teaching. Every single one. That's how important it is. That's how damaging it is. That's how easy it is for churches to let false teachers sneak in and let them stay, even if they know they are there, wreaking havoc throughout the whole church.

Q: How can we best prevent ourselves from being “blown about by every wind of doctrine”?

Q: In what ways do you need to grow in spiritual maturity so that you will be able to recognize false teachers when you see them?

2 Peter 2:20–22 [Read]

Talking Point 3: They once knew Christ, but they have relapsed into sin.

Q: Why did Peter say it would have been better for them to have never known Christ than to relapse into sin after having known Him?

This is a difficult passage. We believe Peter was referring to those who *said* they were Christians or even *appeared* to be Christians but later showed by their apostasy that they never really belonged to Christ.^{xvi} MacArthur wrote,

We need not worry about keeping or losing our salvation because it is not based on our deeds. Instead, it is based on the unchanging person of Jesus Christ (Heb. 13:8; John 10:27–29; Rom. 8:28–39; 1 Cor. 1:8–9; Phil. 1:6).^{xvii}

As we said in lesson 10, God doesn't want us to worry that we may lose our salvation every time we struggle. These false teachers didn't lose their salvation; they showed their true colors. When they “became Christians,” they never really changed. Like a dog returning to its vomit or a pig returning to the mire, they had been washed off on the outside, but not made a new creation on the inside (2:22).

Peter described their apostasy in a way similar to how Jesus described what happened with some of the seed in the parable of the sower. These false teachers were like the seed that was sown among thorns – “This is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word and it proves unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22). Jesus explained the first three types of seed as people who have heard the Word of the kingdom and responded, but didn't grow deep roots and bear fruit, that is, didn't really become believers. This isn't losing salvation but rather never really becoming a disciple. They may have heard the Gospel and thought it sounded good and even claimed to have “accepted it,” but they never bore fruit, which is how Jesus said we would know false teachers – by their fruit (Matthew

7:15–20). Bearing good fruit is the sign of true regeneration, the sign that someone is abiding in the vine. To ask if a believer can lose his salvation is asking the wrong question of the text. The right question is, What does it mean to be a true believer in Christ, and how can we tell if we have really been saved?^{xviii} Not that true believers can't make mistakes and even commit grave sins (such as King David), but if we are not bearing any Fruit of the Spirit in our lives, if we are not growing in godliness and obedience to Christ, if we don't have a desire to follow Jesus and a love for His Word, then we should ask ourselves whether the Holy Spirit has really changed our hearts.

Peter concluded that it would have been better for these false teachers if they had never heard the truth at all. Barclay wrote, "If a man has never known the right way, he cannot be condemned for not following it. But, if he has known it and then deliberately taken the other way, he sins against the light; and it were better for him that he had never known the truth, for his knowledge of the truth has become his condemnation."^{xix} Jesus taught in the parable of the night watches that those who knew the master's will but chose not to obey it would be punished more severely than those who didn't know His will (Luke 12:41–48). It is unclear whether this referred to their eternal punishment or simply the sad state of their lives – that they returned to their own vomit and returned to wallow in the mire. They escaped the defilements of the world, but then let themselves become entangled in them again (2:20). It is as if they were set free from prison but then walked right back and locked themselves up again. They were missing out on the amazing life of freedom they could have had in Christ. They had full access to the light and yet chose to stumble around in the darkness. They had become enslaved, entangled and overcome by sin (2:19–20) – the exact *opposite* of what we are in Christ (Romans 8:22–39).

Peter's words were a condemnation of those false teachers, but they are also a warning for all of us. Does this describe me? Paul and Peter both encouraged their readers to examine themselves (2 Corinthians 13:5), to be diligent to confirm their calling (2 Peter 1:10) – not to worry about losing our salvation, but to examine our hearts to be sure our faith is real and push ourselves to grow stronger and deeper in our faith.

Q: How have you seen God changing your heart since you became a Christian? How has He grown the Fruit of the Spirit in your life? How has He given you a desire to walk in His ways and to follow Him?

Q: Which of the Fruit of the Spirit does God need to grow more in you? How can He develop those fruits in your life?

Q: In what ways are you tempted to return to your old ways, habits and sins? How is God calling you to move fully into your new life in Christ?

Took

Main Point: These false teachers are not only wrong in their theology, they are wicked in their lifestyles.

The website MarketWatch.com lists five questions investors should ask to protect themselves from becoming the victim of a Ponzi scheme:

1. How and why does this investment strategy work?
2. Why does this investment deliver returns that are either bigger or more consistent than what I can find elsewhere?
3. When can I access my money?
4. What are the alternatives being offered by someone else?
5. Who gets the checks?^{xx}

Just as investors need to defend themselves from being deceived by suspicious schemes, Christians need to protect themselves even more so from being led astray by false teachers.

CHALLENGES

THINK: *How can I recognize false teachers in the Church today?* What kinds of messages are false teachers sending and how do they conflict with the Gospel? How can I recognize the difference? How can I protect myself from their false messages?

PRAY: *For the Church.* Both for the Church universal and our church in particular, that we will be protected from false teachers and that if they arise, we will have the strength to handle the situation in a godly way. Pray for boldness and courage as well as a solid knowledge of the Scriptures, spiritual maturity, and the discernment to recognize false teaching when we hear it.

ACT: *Meditate.* If our response is to grow in spiritual maturity, then developing the Fruit of the Spirit isn't something we can make happen on our own. It is something the Spirit grows in us. Yet, spiritual disciplines such as meditation can help us grow spiritually stronger in the same way that exercise helps us grow physically stronger. Set aside some time this week to meditate on God's Word. Ask the Spirit to speak to you and listen for His voice.

ⁱ <https://www.biography.com/crime-figure/charles-ponzi>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

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- ^{iv} William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter, The Daily Bible Study Series* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976).
- ^v Charles John Ellicott, *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol VIII: Ephesians–Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015.)
- ^{vi} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/>
- ^{vii} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/causes.html>
- ^{viii} William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter, The Daily Bible Study Series* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976).
- ^{ix} Charles John Ellicott, *Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol VIII: Ephesians–Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).
- ^x Joseph Benson, *Commentary of the Old and New Testaments* (New York, NY: T. Carlton & J. Porter, 1854).
- ^{xi} Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).
- ^{xii} Albert Barnes, *Hebrews to Jude, Barnes Notes on the Old and New Testaments, Vol 12* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996).
- ^{xiii} David Mandel, *Who's Who in the Jewish Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication, 2007).
- ^{xiv} E.H. Plumptre, *1 & 2 Peter, Jude, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges Commentary* (Cambridge University Press, 1890).
- ^{xv} John MacArthur, *2 Peter and Jude, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2005), 204.
- ^{xvi} *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).
- ^{xvii} John MacArthur, *2 Peter and Jude, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2005), 206.
- ^{xviii} Michael Green, *The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1987).
- ^{xix} William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter, The Daily Bible Study Series* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976).
- ^{xx} <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/5-questions-to-escape-the-next-madoff-2011-12-14>