

## **2 Peter No. 7, “Speaking Ill of Others”**

**2 Peter 2:1-22**

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**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

I'm reading the 22 verses of chapter 2 without much in the way of comment this evening. We will read these verses again to other purposes in the coming Lord's Day evenings, for there is much to consider in this chapter, but tonight I want us to consider a very practical question posed virtually every time we click on a Christian blog; namely Peter's language in this chapter, the way he writes about the false teachers who were troubling the Christians to whom 2 Peter was written. For that reason I want the whole of his remarks before us. I want you to feel the force of Peter's condemnation of these men.

### **Text Comment**

The “but” with which verse 1 begins reminds us that a contrast is being drawn. That contrast is somewhat muted by the chapter division. Remember, the chapter divisions are not original to the Bible; they were added by editors a thousand years after the New Testament. Chapter 2 probably should have begun at 1:18 not at 2:1. Peter had just described the nature of a true prophet and his authority. Now he is going to remind his readers that just as there had always been false prophets claiming an authority they did not rightly possess and in that way had troubled the church, so there were false prophets in their time and they were posing a great danger to these Christians.

Without going into the detail we will on subsequent Sunday nights, the teaching of these false prophets in general seemed to be a form of proto-Gnosticism. The developed Gnosticism that we encounter in the mid to later 2<sup>nd</sup> century that was critiqued by Irenaeus, that is represented in the finds at Nag Hammadi – most famously the Gospel of Thomas – had not appeared by the time of 2 Peter, but its constituent elements were present already in the intellectual atmosphere of the Greco-Roman world. That is, in the prevailing worldview of that time and place the soul, the spiritual part of the human being was what mattered, not the body. The body was widely thought of as a prison in which the soul was confined; as a burden that the soul had to bear. Salvation had to do with the soul, not the body. And the salvation of the soul was achieved through the acquiring of esoteric knowledge, different knowledge and attained in different ways according to the philosophy or religion. That being so, what one did with his body, in his physical life, was immaterial. That will explain the emphasis on various forms of sensuality in Peter's condemnation of their teaching as well as their indifference to the specter of divine judgment. In fact, for the Christian in this way of thinking, the soul being liberated it might even be thought that the more one gave over the body to sensual pleasures – food, drink, sex, and the like – the more one highlighted its insignificance. Or, there may have been in their teaching some thought that through physical pleasure the life of the soul was actually further enhanced in some way. Strange but true! That is the general background of 2 Peter chapter 2.

v.1     “Among the people.” The word “people” is clearly a reference to the people of God. Here is another indication, more subtle than others, that the Gentile believers were now the Israel of God, fully part of the ancient people of God.

- v.4 Remember, much of what follows is paralleled in Jude.
- v.12 Note the “irrational animals” or, as it is also rendered, “brute beasts.”
- v.13 Even in degenerate Roman society it was thought improper to engage in debauchery in daylight!
- v.18 Peter seems to have in mind people who were already struggling to escape the sinful habits of their past life and the corrupting influences of the culture around them. For such people to have teachers come and assure them that there was no need to deny themselves such pleasures was doubly dangerous. It was a message they would be inclined to hear with relief, even pleasure.
- v.19 The bitter irony of this teaching is that it promises freedom but delivers bondage! It did in the lives of these false prophets and it does in the lives of those who embrace their message. This is a spiritual and psychological reality with which we have become all too familiar in our own time. All the talk of liberation has led to ever more degrading forms of bondage. Sexual liberation has proved no liberation at all. I read an interesting article this week on the folk who made the most recent *Pride and Prejudice*, the movie starring Matthew McFayden and Kiera Knightly. The makers of that movie, modern irreligious people in general, were all struck by how liberating the strict conventions that governed dating and the approach of men to women actually were in comparison to what now prevails. No #MeToo movement will be required when such conventions are observed. Now it is all contest and confusion, fear and uncertainty, and, alas, so often shame and deep regret. I read another article this week by a woman who passed through that period of sexual liberation during her college years and looks back on it now with horror and loathing. They were all supposedly liberated but it proved to be bondage and often the path to despair. They knew that, but didn’t know what to do about it. Liberation my foot!

Now this is my question this evening. What are we to do with Peter’s relentless attack on these false teachers, the strength of his invective, and what seems to be virtually the relish with which he seems to describe their sinful motives, their sins, and their doom? Nothing is held back. The vomit and the mud with which the section concludes in v. 22 is a fitting peroration for a passage that is a sustained personal verbal onslaught against a group of men for their dishonesty, their greed, their debauchery, and their insatiable appetite for sin. He doesn’t hesitate to cast aspersions on their motives, not just on their words and deeds. As one commentator summarizes Peter’s account of the lives and teaching of these men:

“Their teaching was flattery; their ambitions were financial; their lives were dissolute; their conscience was dulled, and their aim was deception.” [Green, 105]

And you can bet your bottom dollar that those men would have taken great offense at being described in this way, and they would have defended themselves immediately against Peter’s charges. In v. 2 the ESV’s sensuality is more literally “licentiousness” or “debauchery,” stronger words than our word “sensuality” which today isn’t necessarily pejorative in its connotation. Peter chose *bad* words almost exclusively to describe these men. In v. 3 they are described as

greedy and dishonest. In vv. 12-13 Peter fairly seethes with moral indignation as he describes them as “irrational animals” and people who have no shame, satisfying their lusts in broad daylight. This is a biblical exercise in name-calling!

In our day we tend to cringe when we hear Christians speak in such unflattering, uncompromising, and entirely negative, if not almost vicious ways about other human beings, even false teachers in the church. *Peter has nothing good to say about these men.* He doesn’t temper his criticism with the acknowledgement that they have some good things to say or that we can learn something from them. True enough, we can sometimes cringe when we hear Christians speak who seem determined to find something good to say about people who are undermining the faith of the church. But in our day it is more likely that we will be embarrassed by strong condemnations, especially those that use the sort of vocabulary and the sort of illustrations that Peter employs here.

And this reticence on our part to use such language isn’t simply a squeamishness that results from being part of a culture that refuses to pronounce moral judgments and is offended by nothing so much as the kind of absolute morality that Peter illustrates here. In fact, even in the Bible we are taught to speak of others with reticence and respect, with humility and grace. Think of the Apostle Paul. His preaching and teaching were marked by a firm but gentle spirit. He neither made fun of his enemies nor spent his time raking them over the coals. True enough, most of those to whom he was speaking in the sermon summaries we are given in Acts were unbelievers. Think of the winsome and gentle way he approached the philosophers in Athens: complimenting their eagerness to know God, trying to find in their thinking a hook upon which to hang his teaching of the gospel. Many of those men in Athens would have agreed in some substantial ways with the false teachers who had intruded themselves upon these churches to whom Peter is writing.

But even when speaking of false teaching in the church, Paul counseled temperance, gentleness, and patience. Here is what he wrote to Timothy, his younger associate concerning dealing with falsehood *in the church.*

“Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies: you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil after being captured by him to do his will.”  
[2 Tim. 2:22-26]

To put it plainly, that doesn’t sound too much like what Peter did here in 2 Peter 2! So what *are* we to think of what Peter has said and done here? We find this in the history of the church, to be sure. Some of the polemical writing even of our heroes was ferocious in its description of the enemies of the orthodox faith. Luther and Calvin had no compunction about describing trouble-makers in the church as dogs, and that invective was mild compared to how they could describe such people when their dander was up. Are we – you and I – supposed to speak this way about people who are denying the truth of God’s Word in the church?

On the other hand, church history also furnishes us with examples of people who managed to deal with false teaching and false teachers more temperately. Augustine's dealing with falsehood and misbehavior in the church was famously described as *fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*, strong in the substance of the issue, gentle in the manner of his communication. In our own time, think of Francis Schaeffer who always expressed more sadness than anger in dealing with those who were troubling the church's faith and always replied in largest part with a thoughtful critique of their teaching; or of Phillip Johnson, the UC Berkeley law professor turned effective critic of Darwinism, who managed to make friends with a host of university biology and paleontology professors whose opinions he had criticized very effectively in lectures, books, and articles.

So, what is it to be? Are we to follow Peter or Paul; Luther or Augustine? There is a great deal of Peter in the blogosphere but there is a considerable amount of Paul and Augustine as well. Well, let's step back and consider the context of Peter's remarks here in 2 Peter 2, the immediate context and the biblical context as a whole.

*The first thing to observe is that Peter's invective is addressed to men who represent themselves as teachers of the Christian church.*

There is no doubt that this makes a great deal of difference. So far as we can tell from summaries of Peter's sermons given us in Acts, he would not have spoken like this to unbelievers. We can expect them to live lives that are consistent with their unbelief. But we hope for better things on their behalf: that they might be saved and their lives transformed. It is different with people in the church who wield a certain authority, who ought to know better, and who are threatening the salvation of Christian folk with their false teaching.

Our presbytery recently lost a church. The leadership of the congregation had not only embraced the ordination of women to the Christian ministry and eldership, but had embraced what is now called an "open and affirming" position toward homosexuality. That is to say they were now willing to consider it acceptable for professing Christian homosexuals and lesbians to marry and to cohabit as homosexuals. I was on the committee assigned to deal with the situation and to speak with the pastor and his elders. Our conversation was polite, but we gave them great offense precisely because we made it clear that in our view their position was not simply unbiblical but threatened to eviscerate their claim to be a Christian church. We said frankly that while we were calling no one an unbeliever, it was, in our view, doubtful that future generations of the church would remain Christian in any meaningful sense. We asked for an opportunity to speak to the congregation and they refused precisely because we would have said to the congregation what we had said to its leadership. One of the men wrote to me personally and accused me of being a fundamentalist, of spouting nothing but an embarrassing litany of tired clichés, a self-serving effort to defend my narrow evangelical view of Christianity; that I was defending the cultural zeitgeist of feudal patriarchal white males of four hundred years ago. Those were his words. He was calling me names, as Peter called these men names.

I wrote back.

I see I touched a nerve! My sense, of course, is that if defending these important convictions – important because they strike at the root of both the nature of human beings

and the calling of God – convictions that are the united testimony of historic Christendom...which convictions are the stated position (because they believe it to be the plain teaching of the Word of God) of the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the vast bulk of world-wide Protestant Christianity (dissenters from which convictions are found principally in the dying Christendom of the West), convictions also based on that understanding of the teaching of the Bible accepted by almost all liberal biblical scholarship – that is, biblical scholarship with no ax to grind – I say, if defending those convictions makes me a fundamentalist in the pejorative sense of the word, further discussion between us is pointless. I will leave you to your future and you, I'm sure, will leave me to mine. To each man's master he stands or falls!

What raised the stakes, of course, was precisely the fact that we were accusing them of being false prophets, of undermining the faith of Christian people, of being, in effect, wolves in sheep's clothing. You can be sure that the false prophets about whom Peter wrote did not take his criticism lying down! *There is no doubt that Peter spoke as he did because these men were able to threaten the eternal life of believers Peter knew and loved precisely because they professed to be Christians themselves and they were taken to be Christians by those who listened to them.*

You may remember the origin of the phrase “fifth column.” One of the Spanish royalist generals was marching on a city during the Spanish Civil War and he was asked by a reporter how many columns of soldiers he had. “Five,” he replied. “Four at my back and a fifth column inside the walls.” Ever since “fifth column” has been a term of reproach for traitors in the midst, people among us who are helping the enemy. Well, such were these men about whom Peter is writing here.

*Second, there was an unusually corrupting and debasing character to the particular falsehoods being taught by these intruders into churches that had been founded upon the pure doctrine of the apostles.*

There are errors and then there are errors. Some can be dealt with more gently over time. Others threaten to destroy people's souls in short order. The Apostle Paul was often patient with Christian folk who were confused about aspects of the faith. Every mistake of thought and life did not have to be dealt with as if it threatened the very existence of the church and the salvation of every one in it. But when the gospel was at stake, as it was in Galatia, Paul could be as stern, as unforgiving, and as unbending as Peter is here. He spoke of those who were troubling the church, who wished to distort the gospel and said that they were damned. He says of those who are saying that circumcision is necessary for a Gentile's salvation, “I wish [they] would emasculate themselves!” Similarly, there are passages in the prophets that are as ferocious as Peter is here in their condemnation of Israel's priests and elders who were encouraging the Jews in the idolatrous worship – often orgiastic worship – they had borrowed from the pagan nations around them. Read Ezekiel 23, if you dare!

Well here is one commentator's description of what these men were teaching.

“Peter faced a curiously modern predicament. There were people in the church who lived sensual lives and justified it. The infection was spreading. They did not believe in the notion of judgment and they laughed at the [Second Coming].”

This was doctrine so utterly contrary to Christian teaching, to the example of Jesus Christ himself, and so destructive of the Christian faith and life that it had to be identified for what it was in words that no one could mistake. What is more, as most heresies, but in this case to an even greater degree, it was an insidiously attractive and beguiling form of false teaching. There was that even in Christian hearts that wanted this to be true.

Freed from the law, O blessed condition;  
I can sin as I want and still have remission.

Salvation without sacrifice, without self-denial, without the brutally hard work of mortifying the flesh, without the constant sense of disappointment with oneself that true godliness absolutely demands. Who isn’t going to find *that* attractive? There was lethal danger here and Peter spoke in a way that conveyed his fear that Christians would be undone by this teaching – so quickly undone and so completely undone that there would be no bringing them back. Heaven and hell were at stake and half-measures would not suffice.

True enough, it is not always the case. Real Christians disagree about a host of things, interpret the Bible differently in many ways. Many of these disagreements are disappointing and perhaps troubling to a degree. But they do not rise to the level of threat posed by the false teaching that Peter was confronting. Too often Christians have been far too ready to treat every disagreement they have with other Christians as a soul-killing heresy. The Bible is careful to make a distinction between lethal errors and mistakes made in good faith. We must be careful to make that same distinction. But killing errors must be dealt with in a fashion commensurate with the danger they pose. One does not whisper “Fire!” when the flames are already threatening the very lives of those who do not yet know of the danger! We must be scrupulously careful to be sure the error is indeed so serious. After all, it is one thing for an apostle of the Lord, as Peter was, to condemn with such harsh language. It is another thing for ordinary Christians like us to do so.

So, Peter’s language, the strength of his invective, his insulting words can be explained both by the lethal character of the falsehood these teachers were spreading and by the fact that they were doing so under the guise of being Christian teachers. When Billy Sunday, the former baseball player turned evangelist, famously said that if you turned hell upside down you would find “Made in Germany” written on the bottom, he was doing the same thing. It was German professors of the Bible, ministers in the Lutheran church, who had killed the faith of the German people, had destroyed their souls forever by undermining their confidence in the Word of God. To call them the manufacturers of hell was only to do justice to the crime they had committed against God and man.

I will say as an aside that, as we have noticed many times before, biblical culture, Jewish culture – and Ezekiel, Paul, and Peter were Jews – characteristically expressed itself in the most vivid of terms, terms we in the western world today, would be unlikely to use. There may be a cultural component here to some degree, but since this is the Word of God we cannot ignore the fact that

these are the terms the Holy Spirit chose to use in describing the false teachers then troubling the church. Nevertheless, there is a way of speaking characteristic to that culture and so found in the Bible that must be understood and appreciated in its cultural context.

But let's you and I remember and never forget what the stakes are in our faith and life. We do forget this days on end and this forgetfulness invariably weakens our faith, our life, and our witness. Read the Bible from beginning to end. Read the New Testament from beginning to end. What do we find? Read any book of the Bible, OT or NT and you find the same thing. We find that the issue of life is impossibly serious. A sense of crisis is everywhere to be found. Divine judgment looms over human life; a day of reckoning draws near. This is the teaching of the apostles as it was the teaching of the Lord Jesus before them, and of the prophets before him. Human life is enveloped in this great struggle between two powers, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the Evil One. Every day souls are slipping away either to heaven or to hell. Multitudes remain blithely ignorant of their doom in large part because others take great care to keep them from considering its possibility. According to the Word of God, each kingdom is at work seeking the souls of men and women, their approval and their loyalty. The history of the world and the history of every human being is part of this mighty conflict.

The result is that nowhere in the Bible is there an easy optimism, a carefree attitude, or a moral indifference toward human life. It is a deadly serious affair. That is why teaching that confirms us in such easy optimism, that encourages a carefree attitude is so deadly. Being what we want to hear, being a message so naturally welcome to us, being a viewpoint so amenable to the surrounding culture, but, at the same time, being such a direct contradiction of the Bible's uniform teaching a message such as that brought by these false prophets destroys souls and sends them to hell. That fact is what energized Peter here and led him to speak in such an uncompromising way. He was shouting down this lie at the top of his lungs lest his friends believe it and be destroyed by it.

The world does not take such a serious view of life. Our culture today finds such seriousness about life and about the coming judgment of God, such appalling seriousness about ultimate truth and falsehood, only an artifact of some bygone age. We've moved beyond such things. If we have no interest in making judgments – or so we tell ourselves (we are in fact making them ferociously all the time) – well, God won't be interested in making judgments either, if, indeed, there is a God. He would never be so impolite to us, so disrespectful to our cherished opinions.

That was not Peter's view; that is not the Bible's view; and that is not a serious view of life. There is too much woe, there is too much judgment, there is too much darkness in this world to imagine that somehow or another that we can fashion a view of life that does not account for all the darkness, tragedy and woe. It is a comfortable illusion as is the illusion that one can actually know God and then be indifferent to living the life that pleases God, difficult as that life may be to live. Effort, struggle, sacrifice, frustration, disappointment, and perseverance are writ large all over the Bible's description of believing life. That is why the false prophets had to undermine the authority of the Bible to get people to believe them and follow them. Their teaching could not be found in the Word of God. It has always been so and is today. It was the Lord Jesus who said that unless a person is willing to take up his cross and follow him, he cannot be his disciple. There was no cross in the teaching of these men. That's how Peter knew not only that it was

wrong but how terribly wrong it was. He knew there was a cross, both for Jesus and for us, but he also knew there was a resurrection as well, first his, then ours at the end of the age. It was God himself who said to Peter on the top of that mountain in Galilee, “This is my son with whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him.” No wonder Peter was so aggrieved at men who denied not only what he had seen but everything the Lord Jesus had taught him!

Why did Peter blow his top? Because he was so deeply offended by and worried about the eternal effect of teaching that presented lust as true religion, selfishness as the will of God, and skepticism about fundamental teachings of the apostolic faith as progress. Peter knew that no one gets to heaven by supposing that, if one maintains a pretense of faith in God, covetousness, pride, self-indulgence, gluttony, drunkenness, dishonesty, and the denial of Jesus Christ as the Redeemer and soon-coming Lord are perfectly acceptable. We need to be careful lest we recoil from Peter’s strong language only because we don’t take as seriously as he did the desperate danger that sin poses to every human life, including our own!