

## 2 Peter No. 9, “The Origins of Heresy”

2 Peter 2:12-16

October 21, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Our service this evening being shorter than is customary and with such an important congregational meeting before us, I realized that by returning to Second Peter chapter 2 I could kill two birds with one stone: say something useful in preparation for the meeting that follows and, at the same time, examine another feature of the chapter. So far in our consideration of this fascinating chapter, the more remarkable because of its similarity with the short letter of Jude – often a virtually exact duplication of thought and wording – we have examined the chapter as a specimen of unusually harsh condemnation. We find here a manner of speaking we would, and I think usually rightly, be hesitant to employ ourselves. We considered the reasons for Peter’s strong language. Then we considered two statements in the chapter that pose typical problems for our Calvinistic system of theology; two statements Calvinists have to work to explain in a way that harmonizes them with our doctrines of sovereign grace. Such texts warn us that attempting a neat systemization of biblical teaching is fraught with peril, the danger being that we are very likely to fail to take as seriously as we should texts that do not neatly fit our system. We must never make the mistake of treating any text of Holy Scripture as a “problem text,” whose words we must explain in some way lest it cast doubt on the understanding of the Bible’s teaching we have developed for ourselves. To comprehend the whole truth of God will always require a struggle on our part. There are mysteries in the Word of God, mysteries that must remain mysteries because the finite cannot grasp the infinite. We can understand well enough the individual truths revealed in the Bible; organizing them into a neat system is another matter altogether. Our task is to believe it all, obey it all, and in the face of the impenetrable depths of infinite truth to put our hands over our mouths and confess from the heart that the ways of God are far above us.

### Text Comment

v.15 The burden of Peter’s comparison of these false teachers with Balaam is that Balaam valued money more than the truth and, in the end, got neither.

This evening I want to consider a subject raised in this remarkable chapter of the Bible. Call our subject this evening the “Origins of Heresy.” The subject has two parts. First: where did these ideas come from that were disturbing the people of God and required Peter to write his letter to warn them? That is, *why these particular ideas?* They came, as almost all heresies do, from the worldview of the surrounding culture. I remember how, in this respect, years ago this insight dawned in my mind when I read a remark of Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch polymath and theologian. Speaking of heresy and its origin, in what I thought at the time was an observation of pure genius, Kuyper said that heresy “arises on Christian territory by a fixed law [like a mirage in the desert]; heresies are a necessary deflection of the light of Christianity in the spiritual atmosphere of a given age.” [in Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, 9-10] In other words, anyone could have predicted the form heresy would take in early 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Our heresies are the utterly predictable prejudices of 21<sup>st</sup> century American philosophy and culture imported into the Christian faith. Americans are aggressive pluralists and relativists. We pride ourselves on our

tolerance. We consider it terribly bad form to make judgments about ultimate truth or falsehood. In such a culture obviously the exclusivity of the Christian gospel will be and must be rejected. To say of Jesus Christ that there is no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved is anathema to the American mind. It is arrogant presumption. It is an idea that belongs to a former, less enlightened age. So anyone should have seen that the Christian church would be pressured first to relax and then to reject such exclusivity. *All roads must lead to God*. And, sure enough, Christian churches of all types have succumbed at this point and now teach that there are other ways to heaven than by faith in Jesus Christ. Similarly, in our hyper-individualistic age, an age in which each person is thought both free and competent to define reality for himself or herself, in which no one is subject to laws that stand outside of and above him or her, it was likewise predictable that the historic teaching of the Word of God that every human being has been created to live one and only one kind of life, that every person is subject to the unchanging and unchangeable will of God, and that in the end every life will be judged by that divine standard would prove uncongenial to the American mind and that pressure would build upon the church to conform to that modern sentiment. And so it has; or so many Christian churches have. Today we witness this remarkable development: Christians who claim that man, not God, is the measure of all things!

Heresies arise on the Christian landscape by a fixed law, by inevitable accommodations to culture. Israel never invented her heresies out of whole cloth. She imported them from her neighbors and corrupted her faith by mixing the ancient faith of Moses with the thought and practice of the peoples around her. And so it has been ever since. The heresies that began to surface during the apostolic period all took the form of accommodations to Greco-Roman thought and life. It was this realization that prompted Francis Schaeffer to declare: "Tell me what the world is saying today and I will tell you what the church will be saying twenty years from now." Indeed, his last words spoken in public before his death in 1984 were to a conference of the National Religious Broadcasters in Minneapolis. It was his final warning to a group of people among whom were a number who were already attempting to accommodate the historic faith to modern tastes. His final three words as he left the platform were: "Accommodation, accommodation, accommodation."

The origin of Christian heresy explains why it is so easy, natural, even inevitable for heresy, false teaching to arise on the Christian landscape. The desire to conform is extraordinarily powerful. If you don't think that, live for a year in the American university. We want to belong. We don't want to be different; still less do we want the people of our world to look down on us; to think us strange. No wonder feminism, now such a powerful force in modern American life should have succeeded in many churches to overturn 2,000 years of loyalty to the plain-speaking of the Bible regarding the relationship between men and women in marriage and in the church. No wonder modern orthodoxies regarding sexual freedom should have so quickly made their way into Christian churches that a generation ago would never have imagined thinking what they now think. *The surrounding culture is where heresies come from.*

But 2 Peter 2 poses a second question: why did these particular men *teach* these accommodations of the Christian faith to the prevailing zeitgeist? What motivated them to travel about teaching this new, corrected version of the Christian faith? They may well have found it easy to adjust the apostolic teaching to Greco-Roman culture *for themselves*, as have multitudes after them, but

why go the trouble of attempting the hard work of convincing other Christians to do the same? These men were propagandists, out to persuade others to think as they had come to think! Why did they care?

Peter tells us why. He gives us not only the error of their ways, *he exposes their motivations*. In vv. 12-16 he tells us that these teachers were motivated principally by two things: money and sensual pleasure. Now, you do not need to be an expert in human nature to know that these teachers would never have admitted this about themselves. They would never have admitted that their motivations were selfish, grubby, and juvenile. To the contrary, they were seekers after truth and lovers of men; they were motivated by a desire that others find the freedom they had found. But Peter saw through these men in the same way the ancient prophets saw through the false prophets and priests of Israel, whose motivations were likewise conventional: money, safety, pleasure, approval, and power. And we need to bring the same insight – an insight informed by the Word of God and by the history of heresy both in biblical times and ever since – to the motivations of false teachers in our own time.

Sometimes such teachers are honest enough to admit their real motives in choosing one belief system and in rejecting another. From Aldous Huxley to Richard Dawkins they have admitted that they chose to believe that there is no Creator of heaven and earth, that human life is an accident of matter, time, and space *precisely because it liberated them from Christian morality*. They didn't want to live as the Bible commands us to live and if they could explain human life in some other way than as the creation of the infinite personal God, they wouldn't have to. For Huxley and others, as for these false teachers of long ago, it was sexual liberty they wanted for themselves. They chafed under the Bible's requirement of chastity. They wanted the sexual pleasures of fornication and adultery without the nagging of an uneasy conscience. In Dawkins's case he said that evolution allowed him to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist, which, whether he intended it as such or not, was an admission that he believed in evolution first and foremost not because it's where the evidence took him but because *he did not want there to be a God*, such a God as might demand a life from him that he did not want to live. To be sure, most people are neither so perceptive nor so honest about their motives. But the fact is *motives are powerful things. They can make us believe almost anything!*

Here, Peter says, the motivations were money and sensual pleasure. Their doctrine was, as we said previously, an incipient form of what would later be known as Gnosticism, and already apparently was marked by two of the emphases that would later be characteristic of Gnosticism: intellectualism (salvation through knowledge) and antinomianism (an indifference to the requirements of God's law). Christian antinomianism, of which there have been many versions through the ages, has not always produced blatant immorality. In fact, the Puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> century had to admit that some of the antinomians of their day were godly and moral men. But in this first century version of antinomianism immorality, sensual pleasure unconstrained by God's law *was the very point*. It was a view designed to liberate men from the law of God.

It would be easier to explain precisely how their desire for money and their pursuit of physical pleasures motivated them if we knew more about what it was that they taught, but the main point is clear. In those days traveling teachers made a living off their disciples and the more popular their message the more money they would make. We've seen enough of this in our modern

world – people making fabulous sums of money by telling people what they wanted to hear – to doubt that the same would have been true in the first century. What better way, then as now, to gather a following than adjusting the Christian message – which, as Christians, these people claimed to believe – to the thought and life of the culture – which, as inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world, these people found familiar and enticing. By taking the sting out of Christian ethics, by making the Christian life far easier to live and more pleasurable, by allowing a Christian to live more as those around him lived, they made being a Christian an easy thing rather than a hard thing. Who wouldn't be tempted by that?

This seems to be the sense of v. 18 where Peter worries about new Christians who have just recently escaped the enticing bondage of first century sensuality and are now being encouraged to return to it by being taught that God, far from requiring a life of self-denial, had no interest in their chastity or their self-restraint in regard to food and drink. It is hard enough to live a pure life in an overtly impure world – as we all know –; how much more when Christian teachers are encouraging you to give way to the desires of our flesh! Imagine the havoc were serious Christian believers today to be widely exposed to impressive, persuasive teachers who, by clever manipulation of the teaching of the Bible, promoted the virtues of pornography, of sexual experimentation, of gluttony, and of inebriation as paths to enlightenment and the vision of God! In the culture we have all sorts of such teachers. Recreational marijuana indeed!

In any case, one of Peter's primary strategies for weaning these believers from the influence of these teachers *was to expose their motives*. The *reason why* someone does what he does and says what he says has everything to do with whether we should pay any attention to that person. Remember, human beings are the only creatures with motives, that is, reasons that are of a moral nature, reasons that can be right or wrong. We alone rationalize our conduct; defend it with reasons. We alone can do the same things for different reasons. It is because we have motives that the Bible should say that out of the heart flow the issues of life and that as a man thinks so he is. The Lord Jesus was, you remember, always going down to the motives. His complaint against the Pharisees was not usually *what* they did but *why* they did it. They fasted, but he did too. They tithed, but he did too. They prayed, but he did too. They attended synagogue, but he did too. They kept the law, at least after a fashion, but he did too. The difference was – and it was a very great difference – that they did what they did for different reasons than those for which he did the same things. They fasted and prayed so as to be seen and admired by others. He did it for the sake of his own soul and to please his heavenly Father. They gave to the poor to get credit for themselves with God and man; he cared for the poor because he loved them. And in those different motives was found the difference between good and evil, life and death. To be sure, as the Lord himself acknowledged, it is always better to do the right thing, even if for the wrong reason; but true good, the good that is pleasing to God is always and only doing the right thing for the right reason. We may concentrate on the behavior *but God looks on the heart!*

*What is more, motives always tell in the end.* Bad motives, selfish reasons, if left unexamined, unrepented of, uncorrected, will eventually produce terrible conduct. It was their motives, unchecked, unreformed that led the Pharisees at last to murder the Prince of Life. They were motivated by self-interest and Jesus threatened that self-interest. This is why people finally take the plunge and abandon biblical truth they once confessed to embrace teaching they would have once repudiated root and branch. Their motives won out. Their desire for this or for that. This

was G.K. Chesterton's point when he said that men were made to live and act *for right reasons*, that it was not enough for human beings to do the right thing; they had to do the right thing for the right reason as every human being knows. What makes us human is precisely our motives!

“You can free things from alien or accidental laws, but not from laws of their own nature. You may, if you like, free a tiger from his bars; but do not free him from his stripes. Do not free a camel of the burden of his hump; you may be freeing him from being a camel. Do not go about as a demagogue, encouraging triangles to break out of the prison of their three sides. If a triangle breaks out of its three sides, its life comes to a lamentable end.”  
[*Orthodoxy*, 243-244]

Well that is the terrible mistake we are making in our time. We too, as these men – as Peter says in v. 19 – are promising freedom but engendering bondage. Why? Because we are, by giving over the life of human beings to their materialistic and sensual urges or motivations, dehumanizing them, we are taking from them their very humanity. They are creatures made to be motivated by higher things, by purer things. They were made to do the right thing for the right reason and, as in the first century so in our time, we have removed motivation from the evaluation of human conduct. Right motivation is essential to human life as God made it and we are teaching people not to judge their conduct by their motives! *But motives make the man or woman*, little as this is understood today.

So, what is the lesson here *for us*? Only this: we must always be alert to our motives, must always realize that only right motives, God-pleasing motives make any action, however right and proper in itself, truly good or truly safe. Motives tell the tale. Motives make us what we are. You are about to take action in regard to the future ministry of this church. You will have thought about your decision. You will have weighed the considerations. Now it is time, as with all decisions and all your behavior, to weigh your motives. If you act out of love for God, out of love for one another, out of reverence for his Word, out of a desire for the gospel to spread, in hopes of the salvation of the lost and the glory of Christ's name; if you seek God's pleasure and not your own, you may not all agree, but you will be seeking the same thing and God will look upon your hearts and be pleased. You are human beings! And that means not only that you *have* motives but that your motives define your behavior, as they defined the behavior of these false teachers. And that means as human beings and as Christians our motives must be the first thing we consider in examining ourselves, our hearts, and our actions. Not first *what*; but *why*!