**The Attractiveness and Destructiveness of False Teaching**
**2 Peter 2:1-10a**

We're looking at Peter's second letter, which Peter began by calling his first readers, and you and me, to live lives of virtue. And it begins to become obvious why. There are clearly people in these churches encouraging the other members to do the opposite: to not be constrained by Peter's and the apostles' teaching, but live how they want to live.

And that's not exactly irrelevant for us, is it? Because how *are* you supposed to live? As we saw last week, is the Bible really supposed to be your guide, or the messages that you hear all around you? Is Peter's call to live a life of virtue the right one, or is the key to happiness to get enough money, and have enough sex, and generally get your own way?

But what if you pursuing those things ends up destroying the very thing you're looking for?

Because that's what Peter's talking about in today's passage. And he calls that approach to life 'false'.

We're going to look at four things: the reality of false teaching, the nature of false teaching, the condemnation of false teaching and the rescue of Christ.

**The Reality of False Teaching**
Now, whenever there's a big bank robbery, or a gold bullion heist, the question gets asked, 'was it an inside job?' Or think of the situation in war-time. There's the enemy over there, on the other side of the trench, but what about the people behind our own lines, who are supposed to be on our side, but are actually working for the enemy, the so-called fifth-column, the 'enemy within'?

Because when it comes to the Christian faith, as one writer puts it, 'the undermining of the faith is usually an 'inside job''. Churches don't go down to enemy fire from the outside, but from saboteurs on the inside.

Look at v1, 'But false prophets also arose among the people, *just as there will be false teachers among you*.' And Peter's been explaining how the Old Testament prophets wrote and spoke as they were inspired by God, and carried along by the Holy Spirit.

But they weren't the only ones speaking, Peter says. There were also false prophets. Like the ones the prophet Jeremiah had to contend with. Because while he was warning the people about the coming judgment of God, which came with the Babylonian invasion, there were others saying, 'don't listen to Jeremiah, he's so narrow-minded, God's going to bless us, not judge us.' As Jeremiah famously said, they were preaching, "'peace, peace', when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14).

But history has this habit of repeating itself, doesn't it. Because if there were false prophets in Jeremiah's day, there are also false teachers among you, Peter says. And their message is strangely similar - 'Peter and the apostles are telling you Jesus is going to come back and judge everyone? That's such a negative, narrow minded message. Don't let that kind of fear or fairy tales stop you from living the life you want to live.'

But notice what Peter actually says, v1 again, 'just as there *will be* false teachers among you.' He's using the future tense. So it's not just that there were false teachers in the churches he's writing to, it's that this is going to be an ongoing problem in the church.

And, of course, history has proved him right.

**The Nature of False Teaching**
Verse 1 again, 'Just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies.'

Now, when we think of someone bringing something in secretly, we tend to think of spy thrillers, and something being done under the cover of darkness, and cloak and daggers. But this a hard phrase to translate. It's why your Bible translation may simply have 'bring in' or 'cleverly teach'. Because it has this sense of people bringing in stuff *in addition to*, or sneaking stuff in *alongside* the apostles' teaching.

Because however they're doing it, false teaching is always either adding to, or subtracting from, the gospel. Yes, there's Jesus, but something else other than him and his work and his glory begins to take centre stage. And in all the additions, the gospel gets lost, like a beautiful story book, buried under textbook upon textbook of algebra, they add all this stuff and you can no longer make out the gospel. Or, yes there's Jesus, but all that stuff in the Bible about what you should believe, or how you should live, you don't need that, you can dispense with that. And they chip away and erode the gospel, like termites eating away at the foundations of a house, until there's no home to shelter in. They either add to the gospel or they subtract from it.

And so Peter tells us two things about their teaching: it's attractive but it's also destructive.

Firstly, it was ***attractive***. Verse 2, '*Many* will follow their sensuality.' Athanasius, was the 4th century bishop of Alexandria. And for years he battled the heresy of Arianism, sometimes fighting that battle pretty much alone. So alone that he was nicknamed: *Athanasius contra mundum* - Athanasius against the world. But if you'd asked Athanasius he would have told you, the numbers have nothing to do with it. Because loads of people can be embracing something, or agreeing with some new way of seeing life, or interpreting the Bible, and it still be wrong.

It's why in v5-7 Peter uses the example of Noah, and his family, and then Lot, being rescued from divine judgment. Because what's one family in the world, or one man in a city? Talk about a minority. Sure, Peter says, but they may also be right.

It's why in his book *Orthodoxy*, GK Chesterton recommends that we always remember, 'the majority of the dead.' Sure, everyone in our time might be falling over themselves to agree with some new teaching, or affirm some lifestyle, and those who don't may be in a small minority, but what has the church, the saints who have gone before us, *the majority of the dead*, taught down the years?

But you've also got to ask, what makes what false teachers are teaching so attractive? Well, Peter tells us: v2, 'many will follow their *sensuality*.' So the advertisers are right, aren't they? Sex sells… even when it comes to theology. Because when Peter talks in v4 about the 'angels when they sinned', he's almost certainly thinking of Genesis 6, and angels having sex with women; and when he talks in v6-7 of 'Sodom and Gomorrah… [and the] sensual conduct of the wicked' and in v10 about 'the lust of defiling passion' it's pretty clear Peter's addressing their teaching on sex. Because what's more attractive, living the self-controlled life of virtue Peter's calling them to, and embracing a Christian sexual ethic, or throwing that aside and embracing whomever you want?

But, of course, if history repeats itself, somethings also never change, do they? You see, here, Peter raises the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, and that inevitably raises the question of same-sex relationships and are they acceptable for Christians today? And you'll find plenty of churches who will say, 'yes'. But Peter's saying, 'no'. But again what's more attractive, what the church has always taught, without exception, until the last few years, or this new teaching that's been brought in alongside? Which is more attractive, to be told 'you're a bigot and a hater', or 'you're loving, and affirming, and inclusive, and we approve of you'. That you're on the wrong side of history, or the right?

But like Athanasius, Peter's saying, however hard it is, however much in the minority you feel, however costly this may be for you personally, the numbers have got nothing to do with it. You see, in v2 he calls Christianity, 'the way of truth' - it's a way of being in the world, it's a lifestyle, but a lifestyle based on the truth of God's word. And as for being on the wrong side of history, Peter would say, 'but that these false teachers have much too short a view of history'.

And yet, if we think that when Peter talks of *sensuality* or *defiling passion,* he's just got homosexuality in mind, we've missed the point. Whenever the New Testament writers address sexual immorality, they're thinking of any sexual activity outside of the covenant of marriage. It's why the Epistle of Diognetus, written sometime in the second century, says that these early Christians 'shared their bread, not their bed.' They were marked both by a care for the poor and a sexual ethic very different from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture of the day. Plus, Jesus said that even to think a lustful thought is to commit adultery in your heart. He raises the bar so high that all of us stand guilty.

The problem is, these false teachers would say, 'yeh but you're not *really* guilty, don't listen to Peter.' And maybe you think something similar.

Maybe you hear all this stuff and think, 'Why are Christians so obsessed with sex and what people do with their bodies?' Well, we'll look at why Peter says it matters in a moment, but you already know that what you do with your body matters, or else why do you exercise, or diet, or go to the doctor when something hurts? And given our particular cultural moment, if the body doesn't matter, why does the person who thinks they're transgender want to surgically change their body?

We all know our bodies matter. The *real* issue is that we want to be able to do with them whatever we want, and provided it's not hurting anyone else, and there's consent, no one should tell me otherwise.

But that's the second reason this false teaching was attractive.

Verse 10, they 'despise authority.' And from what Peter writes in his first letter, and in this one, he's likely got three things in mind - firstly, the authority of angels, which we'll get to next week. Secondly, the authority of others whom God has placed over us: like parents in families, leaders in the church, or governments in the state. And as one commentator puts it, these false teachers are so convinced of their own interpretations and teaching, they won't submit to anyone. But over all that, it's the authority of Christ they're despising.

Verse 1 again, they 'bring in destructive heresies, *even denying the Master* who bought them.' And Peter's using the language of the slave market. And at one time these false teachers appeared to be true and loyal servants of Christ: bought by Christ, set free by Christ, to serve Christ, but now they're backtracking on that. By what they taught and the way they lived it was obvious, Jesus was not their Lord, their only master was themselves.

But as Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, 'You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.' (1 Cor 6:19-20).

But what seems more attractive, more appealing, to have Christ as your master, with your life being conformed to him, or be told you can be your own master, deciding for yourself how you're going to live?

Except, have you ever had that experience of picking up an apple that looks red and juicy and thinking this is going to taste as great as it looks, you take a bite and 'ugghh'. It's soft and wooly and tasteless.

And Peter's saying, sure this kind of teaching may look attractive, but in reality, secondly, it's ***destructive***. Verse 1, again, they 'secretly bring in *destructive* heresies.'

Destructive on multiple levels. Destructive because it destroys the gospel.

But it's also destructive because it robs you of the very thing you're looking for. And you already know how this works! In her book, *Generations*, Jean Twenge, Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University writes about the ironic impact of social media. Ironic because the premise of social media is that it brings us together and enriches our lives. But in reality it's done the opposite - it drives people apart, it increases divisions, it leaves people more anxious and addicted to their gadgets when they could be talking to the friend sat next to them.

But false teaching does the same. You see Twenge also argues that while trust in families and institutions and government are in decline, support for gay marriage, or the desire to make money are all on the up. Why? Why are some things going down and others going up? And the answer's individualism: life really is about me and I should be able to live the way I want, and pursue the wealth that makes that possible. But of course, as Twenge points out, it's not just trust that's in decline, so is happiness. We're wealthier than ever but more unhappy than ever.

Or, think of the media and Hollywood and sex. Because they'll tell you, the way to have great sex, and be happy, is to throw off these archaic Christian views and have sex with whoever you want, provided there's consent. And yet, all the evidence says we're having less sex than ever. The one group for whom that's not the case is those who are married.

So, false teachers tell you, forget this stuff about Christ being your master, throw off this stuff about virtue and a coming judgment, and you'll be happy and fulfilled and having lots of sex. And in reality it's destructive heresy. It robs you of the very thing it promises you. It destroys the thing you're looking for.

But thirdly, it's destructive because it tells people it's fine to lead the kind of lives that put them at risk of eternal judgment. As Paul writes, 'Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor

idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.' (1 Cor 6:9-10). As Peter says in v1, they're 'bringing upon themselves swift destruction.'

**The Condemnation of False Teaching**
Look at verse 3, 'Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.' So, here are these guys telling the churches, 'look, this stuff about future judgment… you don't need to worry about that,' when it's that very denial that makes them liable to judgment, Peter says, *and* history makes it clear, God's got a track record of judging the wicked.

Verse 4-9: 'For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned… [and] if he did not spare the ancient world… when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; [and] if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes… then the Lord knows how… to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.'

In other words, turning our backs on God always ends in judgment and unrighteousness always ends in ruin. But maybe you hear that and think, yes, but surely Jesus was much more loving and affirming than this? Well, as is often pointed out, Jesus spoke about eternal judgment more than anyone and in Luke 17 he uses the same examples as Peter, of the flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and says, 'so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.' (Luke 17:30).

And so you could respond by saying, 'well, if that's what Christianity's about, I'm done with it.' But are you? You see, deep down you have a deep sense of justice. We all do. You know that there should be some accounting for wrong things that are done. And who but God can make that call? Plus, as we've seen, if you do turn your back on Christianity and pursue a life of individualism and pleasure, it'll rob you of the very happiness you're seeking.

But maybe you have the opposite reaction and think, 'I've got no problem with this, I'm all in favour of these people getting judged. They're what's wrong with the world.' Except the Bible tells us, 'no, it's not *them* out there, it's *this* in here, we're *all* what's wrong with the world.' And the very things we condemn in others we are guilty of ourselves.

And so Peter says there is a much better response to coming judgment.

**The Rescue of Christ**
Now, in all that Peter says about the coming judgment, there is one thing that's just a little perplexing. It's the way he describes Lot: v7, '*righteous* Lot'. Righteous?? I mean this is the man who offered his daughters to a mob demanding sex with his guests. This is the man who had to be practically dragged out of Sodom before destruction fell. This is the man who, having escaped, promptly got so drunk his daughters could have sex with him. Surely, he was a man so immersed, so ethically and morally blunted by the culture of Sodom that he was anything but righteous?

Except, Peter is drawing on a long line of Jewish tradition that makes exactly the point Peter is making, that Lot was righteous as Peter says in v7, 'greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked.' And when, prior to Sodom's destruction, Abraham pleaded with God, asking him to withhold judgment if only 10 righteous people were found there, the fact that God rescued Lot but

still destroyed the city tells you that in comparison to others God considered him righteous. That there was still something about what was going on there that bothered him.

So we may not have rescued Lot, but God did, because he is merciful to those who don't deserve it, merciful to save people like Lot and people like us.

You see, think again how Peter describes these false teachers. Verse 1, they are 'denying the Master *who bought them*.' And as we've seen, that's the language of the slave market. But the implication is that we're all slaves, slaves to sin, slaves to individualism and slaves to its false promises. But the gospel tells us that Jesus has paid for our freedom, he's unchained us from sin and the judgment it deserves, and brought us out into his mercy and forgiveness. But what did he have to pay to purchase our freedom? His own life: the righteous for the unrighteous.

It's why having told us about all the people who will not inherit the kingdom of God, including sexual sinners, Paul immediately follows up, 'And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God' (v11).

You see, our past, or our sin, or our sexuality, is not what defines us, Christ does. And if God has a track record of judging wickedness, Peter says he also has a track record of rescuing those who look to him for help. Verses 5-9, 'If he… preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others… and if he rescued righteous Lot… then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials.' Even when you're in a minority. Even when being faithful to him will cost you dearly.

You see, that word *trials* could also be translated *temptation*. So it's not just that when you put your trust in Christ he will see you safely through the judgment to come, which he will; it's that between now and then, as you live in a world running full tilt after expressive individualism, you *will be* tempted - by sex, by money, to despise authority, or whatever. But take heart, Peter says, God knows how to rescue you from that. But you've got to trust him. Christ has got to be your master.

And listen, he is no cruel despot. Jesus loved you so much he gave his life for you. So however hard the life of obedience might be, you can trust him. As the Book of Common Prayer says, his service is perfect freedom.