

A Growth That Endures...



A VERSE BY
VERSE
EXPOSITION
OF THE
EPISTLE OF
2ND PETER

An Empty Message 2 Peter 2:17-22 (733)

Chapter 2 of 2 Peter is one of the most severe in the Bible. In verses 1 through 16 the Spirit of God describes and denounces men who would propagate error in His church and who would deceive His people into sinful, disobedient lifestyles. In verse 14 Peter refers to them as *an accursed brood*. These are men who live and move under the curse of God. God has declared that they are evil, detestable. God has determined to punish them for their despicable evil.

Peter shifts gears between verses 16 and 17. In 10-16 his focus is on the character of these men. He has nothing complimentary to say. But in 17-22 his focus is on the content of their ministry and message. In other words, at the end of the day what do you have. Peter's conclusion is that you have nothing. The men and their message are both empty bubbles. They are hollow, void, destitute of substance. Indeed, his big idea is this: **a deadly ministry is one void of the transforming power of the gospel.**

Now, a deadly ministry may be known by what it **does** say about the gospel. A preacher and his ministry may be marked by blatant doctrinal error. Present-day theological liberalism, for example, often argues that Christ is not fully divine, that the Scripture is not really the very Word of God, that there are multiple ways to heaven, that men may merit the favor of God by their good deeds, and so on.

A deadly ministry may also be known by what it **does not** say about the gospel. This may be the most seductive. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, two researchers with the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina, interviewed over 3,000 teenagers concerning their religious beliefs. They published their findings in a new book. In a recent article, Gene Edward Veith, cultural editor for WORLD magazine, summarized their findings:

“Christian Smith and Melinda Denton have coined a phrase that describes perfectly the dominant American religion: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism ... Most teenagers believe in a combination of works righteousness, religion as psychological well-being, and a distant non-interfering god ... Even these secular researchers recognized that this creed is a far cry from Christianity, with no place for sin, judgment, salvation, or Christ ... Consider how many Christian publications, sermons, and teachings are nothing but moralism ... Consider how many Christian publications, sermons, and teachings are primarily therapeutic ... Consider how many Christian publications, sermons, and teachings talk about God in a generic way, but say nothing about the Father, who created and still sustains the world; the Son who became incarnate in this world to win our salvation; and the Holy Spirit, who works through the Word of God to bring us

to faith" (WORLD, June 25, 2005, p. 28). This kind of stuff; this gutted gospel, is being taught all over the place this very morning.

Again, at the end of the day both are deadly because they are **void of the transforming, life-giving power of the gospel**. Now let's read our text for the morning.

2 Peter 2:17-22 *These are springs without water, and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. ¹⁸ For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error, ¹⁹ promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. ²⁰ For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. ²¹ For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. ²² It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."*

The book *King Solomon's Mines*, written by H. Rider Haggard, was first published in 1885. The old Stewart Granger/Deborah Kerr movie of the same title was based on this book. In the book Allan Quatermain, the elephant hunter, Sir Henry Curtis, and Captain John Good are searching for Sir Henry's brother who has gone off into unexplored regions of Africa seeking the legendary source of Solomon's fabulous wealth. They are following a 300 year old map produced by a Portuguese explorer (p.22) who claimed to have actually seen Solomon's treasure chamber (p.23). By and by they came to a broad and burning desert.

Trusting the map that indicated a water hole in the middle of this forsaken wilderness, they set out. Listen to the account as told by Quatermain:

“At last, about two o’clock, utterly worn out in body and mind, we came to the foot of [a] hill ... Here we halted, and driven to it by our desperate thirst, sucked down our last drops of water. We had but half a pint [each], and each of us could have drunk a gallon. Then we lay down. Just as I was dropping off to sleep I heard Umbopa [one of their African companions] remark to himself, ‘If we cannot find water we shall all be dead before the moon rises tomorrow’” (p.60). Early the next morning, Sir Henry himself admitted, ‘If we do not find water we shall die’” (p.62).

Well, they did in fact find the water hole indicated on the map. Quatermain describes the discovery: “It was water ... We gave a bound and a rush, and in another second we were all down on our stomachs sucking up the fluid as though it were nectar fit for the gods. Heavens, how we did drink! Then when we had done drinking we tore off our clothes and sat down in the pool, absorbing the moisture through our parched skins. After a while we rose from it, refreshed ... Then we smoked a pipe, and lay down by the side of that blessed pool, under the overhanging shadow of its bank, and slept till noon” (p. 65).

This story is a great lead in to II Peter 2:17. The idea of spiritual refreshment for thirsty souls is on Peter’s mind. In the Old Testament those who preached and taught the word of God faithfully were portrayed as thirst-quenching wells. **Proverbs 10:11**, *the mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life*. It is the purpose and design of God that His ministers do good to the souls of men; that they be

springs of consolation and comfort, dispensing the life-giving truth of the gospel of the grace of God in Christ.

In the Old Testament God refers to Himself as a life-giving spring. **Jeremiah 2:13**, *“For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”* The tragedy is when people reject the true spring and search for another that cannot offer life-giving water. This is exactly what happens when a person rejects the apostolic gospel and embraces an imitation. This is exactly what happens when, in this age of tolerance, we accept that there are numerous, equally valid, approaches to spirituality. Remember, **a deadly ministry is one void of the transforming power of the gospel**. Peter introduces two vivid word pictures to illustrate this point.

Verse 17. These are springs without water, and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved. *These* refers, of course, to the false teachers. These guys promise water for thirsting souls. What they promise sounds wonderful. But at the end of the day their promises are empty. You go after them seeking to have your spiritual thirst quenched but the spring is all dried up. They are like dark clouds on the horizon during a persistent, lingering Texas drought (see also Prov. 25:14; Jude 12). They give hope of, indeed, promise rain that will revive the parched earth, but the wind drives them past us and no life-giving rain falls. It’s all a cruel, heartless deception.

Men are thirsty - yearning for something to quench the need of their souls. I assure you that the gospel as preached by the apostles; the gospel as comprehended in the great doctrines of justification by faith alone; the gospel of

the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ for guilty sinners; the gospel of a righteousness provided by God Himself is the only message on the planet that can quench a man's thirst. All else is sinking sand, empty bubbles, springs without water, clouds with no rain.

Some of you may be thirsting this very morning. Jesus invites you to drink of Him. In **John 4:13-14** Jesus said to the woman at the well, "*Everyone who drinks of this water shall thirst again;*¹⁴ *but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.*" And in **John 7:37-38**, *Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.*³⁸ *He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'*" My friend, are you thirsty? If so, I want to invite you to come up to the front after the service and we can talk about how God satisfies that spiritual thirst through the gospel of Christ.

Verse 18. For speaking out arrogant *words* of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error. The prime targets of these predators are *those who barely escape from the ones who live in error*. This refers to those men and women who are making or have just made the break with the pagan culture around them. They are new Christians. These characters also prey on others who have been professing believers for some time but who have not grown in grace. All of them viewed together are the *unstable* souls Peter mentioned back in verse 14 - those not grounded in the truth of the gospel.

Now, faithful ministers of the Word ought to communicate the truth in terms the people can understand. But these teachers of error love to use big flowery words. As a matter of fact the Greek word for “arrogant” here means swollen, like some kind of puffer fish (see Jude 16). It might be translated *great swelling words* (Robertson, *Word Pictures*, p. 169). They speak this way to impress people. So that the new convert will say, “This guy must know what he’s talking about.” They speak this way to intimidate people. So that the young, simple Christian will say, “Who am I to question or challenge such a man?”

But it’s all “smoke and mirrors.” When you strip away the fancy language and the inflated claims, it is one big scam. And here’s the standard sales pitch. Here’s their recruiting method. They appeal to the lustful desires of human nature. This means that they commend to their gullible hearers the pleasure and the advantages to be enjoyed by their sins. At the same time the danger of committing the sin is covered up, hidden. It’s like a fisherman’s hook being concealed by the bait (see Nisbet, p. 271).

Verse 19. promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. True freedom is found in glad submission to our kind and gracious master, the Lord Jesus. Biblical freedom includes freedom from the law as a covenant or works (Rom. 7:4); freedom from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13); freedom from the dominion of Satan (Heb. 2:14-15); freedom from the terror and allurements of the world (Gal. 1:4); freedom from the dominion of our own lusts (Rom. 6:14).

But the same men who are promising freedom are themselves enslaved to their lusts. Like wild animals they are locked in cages of their own sinful desires. They are free only to sin. They promise freedom. Not the political freedom of

the sort granted to slaves in America in 1863 by President Lincoln. These men promise freedom from moral constraints; freedom to throw off the constraints of law, of conscience, of love, of duty, and so on; freedom to do what they want to do. The definition of freedom is stretched to give liberty to sin, and to loose Christians from the holy commandments of the moral law" (Nisbet, p. 270). **I Peter 2:16**, *Act as free men and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God.*

Verses 20-21. For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. Remember, these men are those who once professed faith in Jesus Christ. They had attached themselves to and were identified with the community of Christians. Undoubtedly they had affirmed Christian doctrine, participated in Christian worship, read the Scriptures, and so on. Intellectually they knew the elements of the gospel and the lifestyle expected of a believer. In this sense they had *escaped the defilement of the world*; they knew *the way of righteousness* and *the holy commandment*.

Why is the last state worse than the first? Why would it have been better for them to have never known the truth? "These men are worse off because they have rejected the forgiveness of their past sins and so they continue to bear them personally" (N. Hillyer, p. 205). That is exactly the point of the portion of the Heidelberg Catechism we confessed. Nisbet says, "The guilt and deserved wrath against those who after illumination by the truth, and external renunciation of

their sins, do return back again to them, is much greater than if they had never been so far enlightened and reformed, their sins being now against light and some tastes of sweetness" (p. 271). Putting it another way: they sin with full knowledge of the gospel.

Note: Early Christianity was known as "the Way" (**Acts 9:2**). One commentary calls *the way of righteousness* "standard Christian shorthand" (Lucas and Green, p. 122) for the entire message of the Word of God. To know this "way" is to be familiar with both Christian doctrine and Christian ethics. I think it also implies some degree of participation in the life of the covenant community of faith. The *holy commandment* is not a single precept that Peter has in mind. Rather it is the entire body of teaching contained in the gospel.

All this means is that their external appearance and conversation was cleansed for a time. They had experienced a measure of external reformation. Some of them may have quite drinking and swearing. They had started dressing a little nicer, acting a little kinder, associating with religious people, going to church, and volunteering at the mission. But external reformation is void of any power to sustain a life of godliness. That's why eventually it gives out. It plays out like an exhausted gold mine. And men are once again entangled in and overcome by their instinctive desires and tendencies to sin. You see, their ministry is void of the transforming power of the gospel.

That this is the correct interpretation is confirmed by Peter's illustrations in **Verse 22**. **It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A dog returns to its own vomit," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire."** This section closes with two proverbs about animals – a dog and a pig. The proverb about the dog clearly comes from **Proverbs 26:11**, *Like a dog that returns to its vomit is a fool who repeats his folly*. My brother and I grew up with

beagle hounds. I have seen dogs do this disgusting thing - regurgitate something only to lick it up again.

The point is pretty simple: "dogs and pigs will always behave according to their natures ... Pigs will be pigs and dogs will be dogs, and they will both remain so – unless something unheard of happens and they are completely changed into another kind of animal" (Bentley, p. 228). These men accomplished an external reformation. But their return to the vomit of sin; their return to wallow in the mud of sin is evidence that they have not been made new by the transforming power of the gospel.

My friends, is yours only an external reformation or have you known the transforming power of the gospel? Have you embraced Jesus Christ? Have you received Him as He is offered to you in the gospel? Has God the Father, by the power of His Spirit, given you a new heart? Is yours a mere attendance at church or a genuine affection for the Church? Is yours a toleration of preaching or a genuine thirst for a word from heaven when you walk through those doors? Are you driven by a sense of duty to God or by a sense of delight in God for His excellence? **II Corinthians 5:17**, *Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.* Remember, **a deadly ministry is one void of the transforming power of the gospel.** I extend to you the invitation from **Isaiah**: *"Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost"* (55:1). My friends, I invite you to Jesus Christ.

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An Empty Message

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In II Peter 2:10-16 Peter's focus is on the _____ of the false teachers.
In II Peter 2:17-22 his focus is on the _____ of their ministry and message.

Peter's conclusion is that you have _____.

Indeed, his big idea is this:

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Now, a deadly ministry may be known by what it **does** say about the gospel.

A deadly ministry may also be known by what it **does not** say about the gospel.

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What we're talking about is spiritual refreshment for thirsty souls.

Peter introduces two vivid word pictures to illustrate this idea of emptiness.

Verse 17. These are springs without water, and mists driven by a storm, for whom the black darkness has been reserved.

Verse 18. For speaking out arrogant *words* of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, those who barely escape from the ones who live in error.

Teachers of error love to use big, flowery words and convoluted logic. They speak this way to _____ people. They speak this way to _____ people.

They entice ... They commend the _____ and the advantages to be enjoyed by their sins. At the same time the _____ of committing the sin is covered up.

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These men promise freedom from _____ constraints; freedom to throw off the constraints of law, of conscience, of love, of duty, and so on; freedom to do what they want to do.

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