

XVIII. Brute Beasts

May 10/12/13, 2021

2 Peter 2:10b-22

Aim: To recognize the characteristics of false teachers and their teaching, to avoid being enticed by their sinful lifestyles and heretical doctrines, and to escape the defilements of this world and the destruction that they bring.

[DSB Note: the title of this lesson comes from three comparisons Peter makes in the text between the false teachers and animals: 1) an extended simile in v. 12: they are *like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed*; 2) an Old Testament allusion in v. 16: *a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness*; and quotation of proverbs in v. 22: *the dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.*]

A. Characteristics of False Teachers (2 Peter 2:10b-16)

Moo: Verse 10a...is transitional. It rounds off Peter's general discussion of God's judgment with a particular application and it introduces the subject of the next verses. Indeed, this half verse captures the two characteristics of the false teachers that Peter elaborates and condemns in verses 10b-16: their sensuality (they 'follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature') and their arrogance ('they despise authority'). In typical manner, Peter takes these up in reverse order, exposing the false teachers' arrogance in verses 10b-13a and their sensuality in verses 13b-16.

Gardner: The second part of verse 10 leads into a more detailed description of the sin and lawlessness of these false teachers. Peter wants his readers to recognize who these evil leaders are and carefully to apply what he is saying to their own church situation.

1. What They Say with Their Mouths (2:10b-13a)

a) *Blaspheming Angels (2:10b-11)*

Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones, ¹¹whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord.

(1) False Teachers (2:10b)

Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones...

(a) *Bold (2:10b)*

Bold and willful...

Moo: The reason most translations and commentaries put a break in the middle of verse 10 is because of a change in syntactical construction. The first part of the verse, with the word 'especially,' continues the sentence begun in verse 4. But the second part of the verse begins a new sentence, where Peter applies two similar words to the false teachers: *bold (tolmētai)* and *arrogant (authadeis)*. It is not easy to find any clear difference in meaning between the two; they function together to draw a picture of 'arrogant audacity.'

MacArthur: Both their words and their actions betray attitudes of self-centered arrogance and self-willed presumption typical of the unregenerate who are the devil's children. They are

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brazen and audacious, *daring* (*tolmētai*—literally ‘darters’ or ‘reckless ones’) to defy God in exalting themselves, no matter the consequences. They are determined to have their own way at any cost, being stubborn and *self-willed* (*authadeis*)—a term that connotes a self-pleasing conceit and obstinacy.

(b) *Blasphemy* (2:10b)

...they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones...

Moo: The false teachers’ arrogance is manifested in their not being afraid to *slander celestial beings*. The NIV rendering ‘celestial beings’ conceals an important ambiguity in the Greek text. The literal translation is simply ‘glories.’ Peter uses this same plural form of the word in 1 Peter 1:11 to refer to the glorious events that Christ experienced after His suffering. In the present passage, clearly ‘glorious *beings*’ of some kind are meant.... As the NIV suggests and most contemporary commentators agree, Peter is referring to angels. Furthermore, most also agree that *evil* angels are meant, since Peter seems to contrast these ‘glorious ones’ reviled by the false teachers with the *angels* in verse 11 (which, since Peter commends their activity, must be good angels). Why is it wrong for the false teachers to slander these evil angels? Presumably because, though fallen, they still bear the impress of their ‘glorious’ origin.

Gardner: They proclaim with pride that what they are teaching is the only right understanding of things. They put down orthodox teaching with great arrogance. Peter talks about their slander of angels. (in spite of some suggestions to the contrary, the word *doxas* here surely refers to angels rather than ecclesiastical or civil authorities, as some from time to time have suggested. This alone makes good sense of verse 11 which uses the angels as an example.). Whether he has in mind their slander of good angels (as Jude 8 does), or of evil angels, matters little here.

MacArthur: *Revile* (*blasphēmeō*), of which the English word *blaspheme* is a transliteration, means ‘to slander’ or ‘speak lightly or profanely of sacred things.’ And *angelic majesties* in this context refers to demons (cp. Jude 8), who are *majesties* (*doxa*, ‘glories’) in that they possess a transcendent, supernatural being, beyond the human level (Eph. 6:12). Although these false teachers were mere mortals, who were by nature ‘lower than the angels (Ps. 8:5), they arrogantly considered themselves superior to angelic beings. The Bible indicates that even fallen angels retain the imprint of divine majesty, a shadow of their pre-Fall glory. In this sense, they are like sinful men—who still retain the divine image (Gen. 1:26; Ps. 8:5).... It should be recognized that many modern false prophets in the extreme sectors of the charismatic movement make their fortunes supposedly binding and flippantly damning demons, as if they had real power over them. They are actually false exorcists like the ‘sons of one Sceva’ (Acts 19:13-16), and perfectly fit Peter’s description.

Helm: Three times in these short verses (2:10b-13a), Peter uses the word *blasphemy* to describe what these preachers say with their mouths. The word *blaspheme* means to speak with a sense of irreverence, especially about God or other holy things. From the text it appears, then, that false preachers were raising their voices flippantly and irreverently against *the glorious ones*. It is difficult to understand, from this text alone, exactly whom these false teachers were blaspheming. We do know, however, that the *glorious ones* were not God.

(2) Good Angels (2:11)

¹¹...whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord.

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Moo: Peter introduces the good angels to contrast their behavior with the disrespectful attitude of the false teachers. Although they are *stronger and more powerful* than the evil angels, they do not *bring slanderous accusations* against these glorious, though fallen, beings.... The Greek text does not at all make clear who it is that the (good) angels are greater than and whom the (good) angels refrain from accusing. I am reflecting the views of most scholars by identifying both with the evil angels.... Confirming this way of taking the verse is Jude 8-9, which contains a rebuke of false teachers that is similar to that found here in 2 Peter 2.... By referring to the archangel Michael and Satan, Jude makes explicit the contrast between good angels and fallen ones that we have argued is Peter's intention.

Gardner: In slandering angels, these evil men are doing something that they are not entitled to do. God's dealings with angels are for Him alone and are not for us to interfere with.

MacArthur: In contrast, even righteous *angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them* (the angelic majesties of v. 10) *before the Lord*. Since there is no modifier, the term *angels* refers to the holy ones who are certainly *greater in might and power* than either fallen men or demons. But even from their exalted position, angels do not disrespect their fallen counterparts like the false teachers do.

Helm: Perhaps these forsaken preachers are speaking irreverently against heavenly angels. The upright host would never think of rejecting authority or stepping out of God's ordained ways. It is also possible, though, that they are blaspheming against faithful preachers like Peter. This is certainly a possibility given the fact that the word for *angels* can simply mean God's faithful *messengers*.

(3) Peter's Meaning

(a) Angelic Background

Moo: How about the larger picture? What, exactly are the false teachers doing? And where does Peter get his information about the angels? To begin with the second point: Jewish tradition is probably once more Peter's source. In the parallel passage in Jude, Jude quotes from a lost Jewish intertestamental book called *The Assumption of Moses*. Peter may also have this tradition in mind. Another possibility, however, is that Peter is continuing to reflect the story about the 'watchers' that he used back in verse 4, which finds its greatest elaboration in *1 Enoch*. In *1 Enoch 9*, the author narrates a scene in which the good angels, hearing the outcry of human beings from the earth as they are being harmed by the evil angels, did not directly intervene, but brought the situation before the Lord. Again, Peter presses into service traditions familiar to his hearers to expose the audacity of the false teachers.

Gardner: The background event that Peter has in mind, where angels did not do what these men are doing, is obscure. It is likely he had in mind the story referred to explicitly in Jude 9. The parallels between 2 Peter 2:11-12 and Jude 9-10 are helpful, although we need to remember that Peter may not have exactly the same things in mind.

(b) Angelic Blaspheming

Moo: As to the first question (the attitude of the false teachers), we begin with the word *blasphemeō*. Peter uses this word at the beginning of his denunciation (end of v. 10, NIV 'slander') and again at the end (v. 12 NIV 'blaspheme'), and he uses a form of this same word to describe the judgment that the good angels refuse to bring against the evil angels (v. 11, NIV

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‘slandrous’). This Greek word, which we transliterate into English as ‘blaspheme,’ can refer to the reviling of fellow human beings, but it more often denotes words or actions that defame God or people and ideas associated with Him. Peter has already accused these false teachers of causing the ‘way of truth’ to be ‘blasphemed’ (2:2; NIV ‘bring...into disrepute’). Now he suggests that they are also making light of evil angels. Since the false teachers seemed to be materialistic and thus skeptical about things like the return of Christ and the judgment to come, this ‘blasphemy’ may have taken a very basic form and involved a general denial of the existence of such beings. Or, since evil angels in particular were being blasphemed, it is more likely that the false teachers were mocking the possibility that their sins might put them at the mercy of such evil spiritual beings. Other possibilities have been suggested, but the fact is that Peter does not give us enough information to be sure about what the problem was. What is clear, however, is that, though fallen, the evil angels still retain a rank higher than that of human beings (that is why Peter calls them ‘glorious beings’). In their arrogance, the false teachers were in some way denying this fact.

Gardner: It was vital for his readers to understand that in slandering the angels, the false teachers were doing something that was utterly unacceptable and seriously arrogant and wicked. The fact that Peter makes no reference to the detail or the specifics we have in Jude, should make us pause to reflect that such information was not in fact important to Peter. Rather, the lesson about arrogance and boldness in matters over which they had no competence or knowledge was what needed to be heeded. Even though these angels were *stronger and more powerful* than those they were accusing, they did not enter an area of authority that clearly belonged to God.

Helm: In either case, the point Peter makes is clear. You can learn a lot about preachers simply by paying attention to what they say with their mouths. False preachers evidence a certain disdain for those who obediently carry out God’s Word. They repudiate anything glorious and good. And in doing so, their voices become nothing more than the grunts of an animal merely caught to be destroyed. Irrational creatures of instinct, these preachers are difficult, if not impossible, to reason with.

b) *Base Animals (2:12-13)*

¹²But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction, ¹³suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing.

(1) Who They Are (2:12a)

¹²But these...

Moo: Peter uses the adversative *but* because he is shifting grammatical subjects back from the angels (v. 11) to the false teachers (v. 10b). This arrogance, Peter suggests, is partly the result of ignorance. Shouldn’t this excuse the false teachers, then? No, for ignorance in the Bible is often a willful refusal to understand God’s truth; and the sharpness of Peter’s criticism makes clear that this is what he has in mind here.

(2) What They Are (2:12b)

...like irrational animals, creatures of instinct...

Moo: Peter goes on to compare the false teachers to animals. If he is thinking especially of the false teachers’ libertine lifestyle in this verse, the point of comparison is presumably between the

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instinctual behavior of animals and the false teachers' lack of concern for moral guidance. They *behave like animals* by following their natural, fleshly appetites without regard for spiritual guidance. In a word, they are 'unspiritual.' But if Peter is still referring to the false teachers' arrogance toward evil angels (as I think he is), then the point of comparison is between the animals' lack of rationality and the false teachers' sinful ignorance. The NIV translation 'brute' (*irrational*) comes from a Greek word that means 'without reason (*alogos*), and this supports the second reading of the comparison. On the other hand, Peter's adjective *physika*, 'natural, 'unspiritual,' (NIV *creatures of instinct*), could point to the first, 'moral' comparison. Perhaps, then, Peter uses the comparison with the animals to refer *both* to the false teacher's ignorance and to their immorality.

Gardner: In fact, they are like brute beasts, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like beasts they too will perish. The comparison of the false teachers and prophets with brute beasts is dramatic. Brute beasts do not have spiritual understanding. They do not understand the will of the Lord for His people, or the place of angels, or the need for behavior that is godly. They do not understand about judgment and salvation or about sexual immorality and arrogance. Rather, they simply live according to their natural instincts. This is what the false teachers are like, says Peter. His indictment is damning and extremely pointed.

MacArthur: The reckless blasphemies of God and angels by false teachers demonstrate that they are like *unreasoning animals* (cp. Jude 10). They are comparable to beasts that have no rational capability, operating solely on self-indulgence and unthinking passion. *Animals are born as creatures of instinct*, meaning that their response to stimuli are pre-programmed, having been built into their genetic makeup by God (cp. Gen. 1:30). Because they operate on instinct, animals are not rational; thus they make no intellectual contributions to society. In fact, for most of them, their primary role in the ecological system is *to be captured and killed*, thereby providing meat for other members up the food chain.

Sproul: Peter likens the heretics to natural brute beasts. Paul says that in repudiating God's revelation, people, professing to be wise, became fools (Rom. 1:22). Heresy is not usually the forte of the washerwoman; it is the occupation of the scholar and the theologian who are puffed up with knowledge and have no fear of God. Peter says that they are like stupid animals who were designed to be captured in the traps of humans.

(3) What They Say (2:12d)

...blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant...

Gardner: They make pronouncements that deny the Lord and His truth, and they arrogantly claim to have the truth in areas which they actually do not understand at all. The area of life they fail to comprehend no doubt has to do with spiritual understanding of matters of the Lord and His will for His people and for this world.

MacArthur: Spiritual pretenders, dishonestly presenting themselves as true teachers, exhibit an animal-like ignorance, *reviling where they have no knowledge*. They ridicule divine truth and heavenly authority, including things they do not even understand. Like animals, they make no positive contribution and would actually serve others best by being dead.

(4) What They Deserve (2:12c, e)

...born to be caught and destroyed...will also be destroyed in their destruction...

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Moo: But the apostle’s chief point of comparison between the animals and false teachers lies in another realm altogether. Picking up a common ancient saying about animals, Peter reminds us that they are *born only to be caught and destroyed*. And he goes on, *like beasts* [the false teachers] *too will perish*. The NIV rendering here is quite interpretive, reflecting two critical decisions about the Greek text. 1) The word *phthora* (which the NIV does not directly translate) often means ‘[moral] corruption,’ as it does, for instance, in the two other places that Peter uses it (2 Peter 1:4, 2:19). If we give the word this meaning, the end of verse 12 then reads, as in the JJV: ‘shall utterly perish in their own corruption.’ Moral corruption, Peter would be saying, is the reason why the false teachers are condemned. But the word *phthora* in the first part of the verse means ‘destruction,’ not ‘corruption’ (‘born only...to be *destroyed*’); and this is probably its meaning in the second part of the verse also. 2) How should we relate this word *destruction* to the verb in the sentence, ‘will perish’ (or ‘will be destroyed’)? a) These words come from the same root, so Peter may be adding the noun to the verb simply to emphasize the idea: ‘they [the false teachers] *will surely be destroyed*.’ b) *In their destruction* could refer to the evil angels: ‘The false teachers will be destroyed with the evil angels.’ c) *In their destruction* could refer to the animals. If so, Peter is saying either that ‘the false teachers will be destroyed *when* the animals are destroyed’ (see NASB; NRSV) or that ‘the false teachers will be destroyed *like* the animals’ (NIV; REB; TEV). The last of these options is the best, doing justice both to the Greek and to the context. (The Greek word *zoa*, ‘animals,’ is the closest antecedent to the pronoun *auton*). Like unreasoning animals, destined only to be slaughtered, the false teachers, in their unreasoning arrogance and sinfulness, are destined also for the slaughter—the slaughter of God’s judgment.

Gardner: These leaders will be destroyed. But the Greek says something like, *will themselves be destroyed in their destruction*. The repetition of ‘destroyed’ and ‘destruction’ is clearly emphatic. Perhaps Peter is thinking of the fact that beasts are reared with a view to their being killed in sacrifice or for eating, and so these evil teachers know their destruction will be as final and as sudden as that experienced by the animals with whom they have just been compared.

MacArthur: Hence the end of verse 12 predicts that the *will...be destroyed*; they will not escape God’s future wrath. When God’s fire consumes the entire world and all its creatures (3:7, 12), false teachers will also be finally wiped out *in the destruction of those creatures*.

(5) What They Earn (2:13a)

¹³ *...suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing.*

Moo: The beginning of verse 13 is also difficult in the Greek text, and commentators suggest two major possible translations: 1) ‘being defrauded of the profit of their wrongdoing,’ or 2) ‘receiving harm for the harm they have caused.’ Almost all the English translations have some kind of variant of the second option, and they are almost certainly correct. Peter uses a word play here to emphasize the idea of just recompense: the false teachers have harmed others; the ‘reward’ they will receive is, in turn, ‘harm.’ ... ‘Being paid back with harm for the harm they have caused’ provides a fitting addition to the prediction of the false teachers’ ultimate destruction.

Gardner: These people have brought harm to God’s people and so will be paid back with harm. The Greek makes another play on words which is not really possible to translate, but may be approximately translated as, ‘they will be wronged as a wage for the wrong they have done.’ ... He is simply saying that they will receive just recompense for their evil.

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MacArthur: In fact, the lake of fire is where false teachers will forever endure the fury of God's wrath, *suffering wrong as the wages of doing wrong*. (*Suffering wrong* is not the best translation, since it might be misunderstood that it is wrong for God to judge them. The Greek is *adikoumenoi*, a present middle or passive verb form best understood as meaning 'to be damaged,' 'to be harmed,' or 'to be injured'). In that way they epitomize the law of sowing and reaping (Gal. 6:7; cp. Ho. 10:12-13). Those who dedicate themselves to false doctrine, exhibiting a presumptuous approach to spiritual things, will eternally be punished for their transgressions.

Sproul: The point is that we must pay for our crimes against God, which is what Peter is saying to his readers. If you do not repent of these things, you will receive the wages of unrighteousness, and the wages of unrighteousness are death. That is what sin earns.

2. What They See with Their Eyes (2:13b-14a)

They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. ¹⁴They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls.

Moo: 'Sensuality' is not a word that we use all that often, but it is difficult to think of a better one to summarize Peter's second main accusation against the false teachers. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines 'sensual' as 'relating to or consisting in the gratification of the senses or the indulgence of the appetite.' This is precisely the quality Peter attributes to the false teachers in verse 13b-16. He draws his picture of sensuality with eight brief characterizations.

a) Daytime Revelry (2:13b)

They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime.

Moo: Pleasure can, of course, be a neutral or even positive thing; God has Himself created many things to give His people pleasure. But the Greek word here for *pleasure*, *hedone*, is the word from which we derive 'hedonist,' one who lives only for pleasure. The Greeks numbered this kind of pleasure among their four 'deadly sins,' sometimes contrasting it with reason (cp. *unreasoning animals* in v. 12). In Peter's day, as in ours, indulgence of sinful pleasure usually took place under cover of darkness. Practicing such hedonistic activities 'in broad daylight' is therefore a sign that the false teachers are completely shameless about their indulgence.

Gardner: Peter returns to describe another aspect of their wickedness. They will also be noted for their carousing, reveling, and feasting. This paints a picture of self-indulgence and sexual impropriety that is entirely unacceptable among God's people. Instead of pleasure in worship and in caring for each other and reaching out to others with the gospel of Christ, these people seem to exist only for themselves and have become so influenced by the thinking of the world that they have entirely forgotten the biblical call to holiness.... Feasting often carried with it a level of sexual indulgence and of drunkenness which Christians should have nothing to do with. Even the pagans would have reserved such activity for the evenings and night time, while these people were indulging themselves *in broad daylight*. As we might say today, 'they had no shame!'

MacArthur: As a general rule, sinners tend to engage in debauchery at night (cp. 1 Th. 5:7).... According to historians, pagan Roman society tolerated dissipation and revelry as long as it was discreetly confined to the cover of darkness. But it frowned on and disapproved of debauchery during the daytime when it could be viewed by everyone. Because of its public nature, such

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behavior was considered inappropriate, even by Roman unbelievers. Nonetheless, the false teachers of Peter's day were so consumed with lust, greed, and vice that they considered *it a pleasure to revel in the daytime*, not wanting to wait until nightfall.

Sproul: Peter likens the heretics to those who count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime. He is saying that heretics are not like people who are a bit ashamed of their nighttime behavior. Rather, they are so arrogant and bold that they do their carousing in the middle of the day and make no attempt to hide it from the eyes of the world.

b) *Blots and Blemishes (2:13c)*

They are blots and blemishes...

Moo: These are obviously general descriptions. The best way to define them is to recognize their opposites. Thus, in 3:14, Peter encourages his readers as they look forward to the return of Christ, to 'make every effort to be found *spotless, blameless*.' Although it is difficult to bring out in English translation, these two italicized words are the exact antonyms of the two words Peter uses here to describe the false teachers ('blot' = *spiloi* and 'spotless' = *aspiloi*; 'blemishes' = *momoi* and 'blameless' = *amometoi*).

Gardner: Peter will call true believers back to holiness and godliness in 3:11-12 as he reminds them again of 'the day of God' when destruction and judgment will come. There he asks them to 'make every effort to be found spotless and blameless' on that final day. These words are the exact opposites of *blots and blemishes* which we have here in 2:13. Spotlessness recalls the requirement in Leviticus for an offering to be spotless (Lev. 1:3). These people were certainly not living up to the standards and demands expected of God's people.

MacArthur: In light of their passion for perversion, Peter likened these spiritual charlatans to *stains and blemishes*—two terms that speak of filthy spots, defects, scabs, and things diseased.

Sproul: It is interesting to note that Peter's words *spots* and *blemishes* are used in a positive form for our Lord and for His body, the church. Our Lord was the lamb without blemish, and although His church right now still has its blemishes and bad spots, in heaven the church, Christ's bride, will be presented spotless before the Father. Peter's application of these words to the heretics stands in stark contrast. He does not simply say that the heretics are marked by spots, but they are spots themselves. Their entire being is defined in terms of their blemishes. Imagine if God were to look at us and see nothing but blemishes. In fact, that is all He would see were we not covered by the cloak of the righteousness of Christ... The Father sees His Son, without spot or blemish, when He looks at us. However, when He looks at the heretic, all He sees are spots and blemishes.

c) *Feasting Revelry (2:13d)*

...reveling in their deceptions, while they feast with you.

Moo: Peter creates a connection with the earlier part of the verse by using the verb *reveling*, which comes from the same Greek root as the word the NIV translates 'carouse.' One of Jude's descriptions of his false teachers makes an interesting comparison with this clause of 2 Peter: 'These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves' (Jude 12a). Peter's reference to the false teachers 'feasting with' the Christians to whom he writes suggests the same scenario: the early Christian 'love feast' held in conjunction with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This 'love feast' was a regular part of the early Christian fellowship, and it is generally recognized that Paul's rebuke of

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the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 presupposes this practice. While we cannot be sure, then, it is likely that Peter here rebukes the false teachers for indulging their own sinful pleasures even as they continue to join with other Christians in celebrating the atoning work of Christ at the church's fellowship meals.

Gardner: Whether Peter has in mind a feasting related to a full meal that accompanied the Lord's Supper is unclear.

MacArthur: Like malignant sores, the false teachers were *reviling in their deceptions* and openly enjoying the fruit of their sin.... To make matters worse, the false teachers brought their lewdness into the church, purposefully choosing to *carouse with* the saints. The word translated *carouse* (*suneuōcheomai*) means 'to eat together,' or 'entertain together,' as in a public meal. Here it may refer to the church's love feast that accompanied the Lord's table. By feigning faith in Christ, the false teachers pretended to have a rightful place at the table. But in fact they were a polluting influence.

Helm: Did you notice, twice in verse 13 alone, that Peter puts their behavior in the language of *reveling*. A preacher's eyes are disclosed by observing what he *revels* in. Ask yourself: what do my eyes focus on? Do I revel in unpleasant pleasures? Am I putting to death my appetite for sin?

d) *Adulterous Eyes (2:14a)*

¹⁴*They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin.*

Moo: Peter's language is more vivid than the NIV translation; he claims that the false teachers have eyes full of 'adulterous women.' By this he means that the false teachers are so addicted to sex that they look at every woman as a potential partner in their lust. The NIV also fails to make clear that the phrase *never stop sinning* also refers to 'eyes'; cp. REB: 'They have eyes for nothing but loose women, eyes never ceasing from sin.' (Peter's description may have been based on a popular ancient proverb, which held that a shameless man did not have *koras* [a pun—the word can mean both 'pupils' and 'maidens'] in his eyes but *pornas* [prostitutes].)

Gardner: This verse makes the point even more strongly and stresses their continual sinning and the sexual nature of their sin. The form this sexual sin took is not specified, though the next verse uses Balaam as an example and that might point towards the nature of the sexual sin involved. ... The whole picture Peter paints is of what we might call a hedonistic lifestyle (the word translated 'pleasure' in the second part of verse 13 comes from the same Greek root *hedone* as our words 'hedonist' and 'hedonism').

MacArthur: In verse 14, Peter shifts the focus from the false teachers' public behavior to their private thoughts and actions. *Having eyes full of adultery* indicates that these spiritual frauds no longer possessed any moral self-control; they could not even look at a woman without viewing her as a potential object of their adultery or fornication (cp. Mt. 5:28). Put simply, their lust was overpowering and insatiable—an appalling form of lasciviousness that was brimming with sinful desire.

Sproul: Their eyes are always looking around for another victim. They are predators. They think only about more opportunities for corruption, and they cannot stop.

e) *Enticing Souls (2:14b)*

They entice unsteady souls.

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Moo: *They seduce the unstable.* Up to this point, Peter’s description of these people has hardly justified the characterization we have been using (based on vv. 1-3) of ‘false teachers.’ He has said a great deal about their personal moral failings but little about their influence on others. From here to the end of the chapter, however, the ‘teaching’ aspect of their false Christianity is Peter’s focus. *Seduce* translates a Greek word that has its roots in the world of hunting and fishing; it suggests the bait used to lure a fish to the hook or an animal to the trap. But the word had become used generally of any kind of (especially) moral temptation (see also James 1:14). So we should probably not think that Peter intends a sporting metaphor. The word *unstable* (*asteriktous*) is again striking by virtue of its antonym; Christians, Peter urged in 1:12, need to be people who are ‘firmly established’ (*esterigmenous*) in the truth.’ It is precisely those who fail to become solidly grounded in Christian truth whom false teachers find to be easy prey. Like trees with shallow roots, they are easily swayed and toppled.

MacArthur: Yet, even as menacing predators, the false teachers still gained a following within the church. As agents of Satan, they were *enticing unstable souls*—preying upon the spiritually weak (cp. James 1:6), convincing them to believe doctrinal lies, and enticing them into debauched lifestyles. The word *enticing* (*deleazō*) literally means ‘to catch with bait,’ and the apostle’s word picture is unmistakable. The false teachers, like fishermen using a lure, tricked their victims to believe their deceptions. Under the guise of authentic ministry, they targeted the unsuspecting (cp. 2 Tim. 3:6-8)—the spiritually immature, undiscerning, or unbelieving.

3. What They Seek with Their Hearts (2:14b-16)

a) *The Way Forsaken (2:14b-15a)*

They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! ¹⁵Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray.

(1) Greed (2:14b)

They have hearts trained in greed.

Moo: *They are experts in greed.* Here again the NIV rendering is accurate but loses some of the force of the original, which, literally translated, is ‘having a heart that has been trained in greed.’ ‘Train’ is a word drawn from the realm of athletic; it suggests that long, hard, and disciplined struggle to become proficient in a sport. These false teachers, Peter implies, as so devoted and consistent in their greed that they must have worked very hard at it for a very long time! And it is their ‘heart’—the very center of one’s being in biblical perspective—that has become so proficient in greed. The word *greed* (*pleonexia*) is a broad term.... *Greed* need not relate only to money; it can also denote the desire for more sexual pleasure, power, food, and so forth. Since Peter has already used this word to depict the false teachers’ love of money (2:3), the *greed* here is also probably mainly directed to financial gain. But we should probably not restrict the word to this sphere.

Gardner: At the heart of their teaching is a greedy appetite, no doubt for money, but also for all the so-called ‘pleasures’ of life.

MacArthur: Beyond sexual favors, the false teachers of Peter’s day were also interested in accumulating wealth. The phrase *having a heart trained in greed* indicates that their immorality was always accompanied by avarice. *Trained* (*gumnazō*), from which the English word *gymnasium* is derived, is an athletic term meaning ‘exercise,’ or ‘discipline.’ As a verb, it

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presents a disturbing description of the false teachers.... The word which he used for *trained* is the word which is used for an athlete, exercising and training himself for the games. These people have actually trained and equipped and taught their minds and hearts to concentrate on nothing but the forbidden desire.... Without question, Peter understood that their actions were not accidental. Their offenses were crimes of premeditation, not momentary lapses of judgment. As masterminds of sin, the false teachers had planned their attacks and purposed their hearts toward sensual and materialistic ends.

Sproul: The word Peter uses for *trained* was typically used for the sort of rigorous exercise that a gymnast in antiquity underwent to prepare themselves for competition. These heretics have undergone rigorous training, but it is not training in godliness. It is training in covetousness. Their hearts are trained in greed, for what they want to possess. Their hearts are trained with jealousy and envy toward those who have something that they themselves may lack.

(2) Cursed (2:14c)

Accursed children!

Moo: *An accursed brood!* (lit., ‘children of curse’). Again, the NIC paraphrases, but the paraphrase is legitimate, for the Old Testament and the Jewish world often attributed a certain quality to people by saying that they were ‘children of’ or a ‘son of’ that quality. Judas, for instance, is ‘the son of destruction,’ that is, ‘one destined for destruction’ (Jn. 17:12), people part from Christ are ‘children of wrath,’ that is, ‘people on whom God’s wrath rests’ (Eph. 2:3); Christians are ‘children of light,’ that is, ‘people characterized by light’ (1 Th. 5:5). Peter has already pronounced his condemnation on the false teachers (vv. 3b-10a).

MacArthur: With understandable disgust, the apostle responds with a blunt but appropriate appellation, *accursed children*. As liars and hypocrites, the false teachers epitomized those whom God has cursed to hell. Peter’s phrase is a Hebraism expressing the idea that people are ‘children’ of whatever influences most dominate their lives (cp. Gal. 3:10, 13; Eph. 2:1-3; 1 Pe. 1:14). As servants of Satan and slaves to sin, they were rightly denounced as children of hell’s curse.

Sproul: They are *accursed children*. They are not the children of God’s blessing but of God’s curse.

(3) Astray (2:15a)

¹⁵*Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray.*

Moo: Characterizing a philosophy or a religion as a *way* was common in the ancient world. The imagery suggests a path of belief that one followed. Biblical writers picked up this language; the Christian movement is sometimes simply called ‘the Way’ in the book of Acts (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). And the path of faithfulness to the Lord can be called ‘the straight way’ (cp. 1 Sam. 12:23; Ps. 106:7; Pr. 2:16; Is. 33:15). Those who lose their religious bearings are described as people who ‘wander off’ from God’s way.

MacArthur: They were motivated by money, as has already been noted in verses 3 and 14. In order to further illustrate his point, Peter compared the false teachers to the Old Testament false prophet Balaam (Num. 22-24; cp. Jude 11). The false teachers, like Balaam before them, were *forsaking the right way*. *The right way* is an Old Testament metaphor indicating obedience to God’s Word. *Forsaking* describes a direct, deliberate rebellion against Scripture. By rejecting

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God's Word, the false teachers of Peter's day refused to walk in obedience, choosing instead to wander away in spite of the eternal consequences (cp. Jude 13).

Sproul: Peter is not describing pagans here but apostates. One cannot apostatize apart from having made a profession of faith, but such profession was false to begin with. These are people who joined the church for every reason except for the right one. They were never true believers. They are unbelievers in the midst of believers, and they will sooner or later depart from the presence of the church (cp. 1 Jn. 2:19)... They know the right way; they have been exposed to the teachings of the gospel; they know what the truth is—they have heard it proclaimed repeatedly—but they have forsaken it and gone a different way.

b) *The Way of Balaam (2:15b-16)*

They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, ¹⁶but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

(1) Balaam's Way (2:15b)

They have followed the way of Balaam...

Moo: Peter gives a specific twist on this imagery, accusing the false teachers of following *the way of Balaam son of Beor*. Balaam is one of the interesting and enigmatic characters in the Old Testament. He appeared on the scene as the Israelites were camped on the plains of Moab, preparing to enter the Promised Land (Num. 22-24). Balak, king of Moab, desperate to stop the Israelite invasion, sought to hire Balaam, who was some kind of prophet, to curse Israel. Although Balaam consulted God about what he should do, the text makes clear that he was still inclined to go his own way. For though the Lord Himself sent Balaam to Balak, He became angry with Balaam as he was going and sent the 'angel of the LORD' to block his path. Apparently Balaam's motives in going were not what they should have been. Balaam could not see the angel, but his donkey did, refusing to move forward and eventually rebuking Balaam. Chastened, Balaam refused to curse Israel but, to the chagrin of Balak, blessed them four times. Particularly significant for Peter's use of the episode is the occurrence twice in the narrative of the language of *the way* in Numbers 22:23, 'the way of Balaam is the literal road he was following; in 22:32, the angel rebuke Balaam for taking a 'reckless way.' Balaam's story made a strong impression on later generations, and he became a prominent negative example in Scripture (see Dt. 23:4-5; Jos. 13:22; 24:9-10; Neh. 13:1-2; Mi. 6:5; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14).

Gardner: Balaam, an example also used by Jude, seems at first to be a strange choice as he received genuine communication from God and, at least to begin with, stood against accepting bribes (Num. 22:1-20).

MacArthur: In doing so, they foolishly *followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor*. The story of Balaam is a classic example of a prophet who was motivated by financial gain. Having been hired by Balak, the king of Moab, Balaam attempted to curse the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness (Num. 22:1-6)... In the first half of Numbers 22, Balaam appears to be a faithful prophet (vv. 7-21). Yet, even in this passage, Balaam's stall tactics imply that he hoped to negotiate a higher payment from Balak before performing his prophetic service (v. 13). Of course, in the end, Balaam did not curse Israel but rather blessed her.

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(2) Balaam's Name (2:15c)

...*Balaam, the son of Beor*...

Moo: Peter introduces a couple of twists to this story in his application. First, he calls Balaam 'the son of Bosor' (NSRV; REB; TEV; the NIV and NASB 'Beor' apparently follows a poorly attested variant). Balaam is called *son of Beor* in the Old Testament, and this name is not found anywhere else.... It is...likely that we have a play on word. The Hebrew word for 'flesh' is *basar*, and various Jewish traditions characterized Balaam as a very fleshly person. Peter may, then, be deliberately modifying Balaam's name to suit his character.

(3) Balaam's Sin (2:15d)

...*who loved gain from wrongdoing*...

Moo: Jewish tradition may also have played a role in another emphasis in Peter's application: Balaam's greed (see the end of v. 15). While hinted at in the Old Testament text, Balaam's willingness to curse Israel for profit became a staple in Jewish stories about him. Moreover, the Jewish stories made Balaam responsible for Israel's rebellion against God in entering into sexual relationships with the women of Midian (Numbers 25). While Peter does not explicitly bring out this element in 'Balaam's way,' it certainly fits perfectly the profile of the false teachers that he has been drawing in 13b-14.

Gardner: In Numbers 25, the narrative moves immediately to describing how the Israelites were seduced to worship other gods and become involved in sexual promiscuity with the Moabites. Although Numbers 23-24 tells us nothing of Balaam's part in the seduction of Israel, we read in Numbers 31 that Balaam had used this course of action on the Moabites (31:8, 16).... In Revelation 2:14 Jesus, writing to the church at Pergamum, refers to people who hold the same teaching as Balaam who enticed 'the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.' This, no doubt, is also in Peter's mind in these verses. Just as Balaam had a role in the seduction of the Israelites into sexual sin with Moabite women, so these false teachers and leaders were seeking to seduce Christians with a sexually promiscuous and hedonistic lifestyle.

MacArthur: Nonetheless, he was more than willing to accept Balak's riches (vv. 18, 40; 24:13) because *he loved the wages of unrighteousness* (cp. Pr. 11:18). If God had not intervened on Israel's behalf, Balaam would have willfully sinned for his own material profit (cp. Dt. 23:4-5). Even though Balaam claimed to speak only the words of God, the Lord knew that he wanted to curse Israel in exchange for money.... In addition to his greed, Balaam was also motivated by sexual immorality. When his attempt to curse Israel failed, the prophet tried to ruin the Hebrews through moral corruption. He used his influence to promote relationships that God had strictly forbidden—namely, marriages between the Israelites and their pagan neighbors, the Moabites and Midianites (Num. 25; 31:19-20). In Numbers 31:16, Moses identifies Balaam as a primary corrupting influence.... Balaam encouraged the Israelites to practice idolatry, immorality, and intermarriage in a second attempt to destroy them—this time by assimilating them into pagan Canaanite society.

Helm: Balaam, perhaps more than any other preacher in Israel's history, set his voice, his eyes, and his heart on God-forsaken ways. When a foreign king came to Balaam and offered him great wealth to preach against God's people, Balaam eventually caved in. In addition, he was the leading religious voice that led the sexual revolution forward during the days when Moses

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shepherded the people upon the plains (Num. 31:16). Defying God’s law, this forsaken preacher promoted sexual union with outside neighboring nations—and in doing so, he lined his pockets with money. Balaam was a bold, willful, daytime reveler if ever there was one. He rejected God’s authoritative ways and was restrained from preaching more words by a created being not made for speech. In the end, Balaam was killed by messengers from God while living in the midst of a godless and sensual city (Num. 31:8).

(4) Balaam’s Foolishness (2:16)

¹⁶...but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

Moo: In verse 16m Peter highlights the utter foolishness of Balaam by noting how he was rebuked by his own *donkey—a beast incapable of articulate speech*. Indeed, Peter concludes Balaam must have been ‘insane’ (NIV *madness*; the Greek word is *paraphronian* and is found only here; Paul uses the cognate verb in 2 Cor. 11:23). And in noting how even Balaam’s donkey understood more about the spiritual situation than the prophet, Peter implicitly associates Balaam with the false prophets who are like ‘brute beasts, creatures of instinct’ (v. 12).

Gardner: Even a donkey understood more of God’s will in these matters than Balaam did; so Peter’s comparison is that, like Balaam, these false teachers have no understanding of the Lord and His will. Indeed, they are worse than the ‘brute beasts’ and ‘creatures of instinct’ which he had called them back in verse 12!

MacArthur: Because of his greed, Balaam *received a rebuke for his own transgression*. While he was riding on his *mute donkey*, the Lord miraculously caused the animal to speak (Num. 22:22-35), and *the madness of the prophet was restrained*. The term *madness (paraphronia)* literally means ‘beside one’s own mind.’ In other words, Balaam was so greedy that he was ‘beside himself.’ His love of money had caused him to act irrationally.

B. Characteristics of False Teaching (2 Peter 2:17-19)

Moo: In 2:10-16, Peter has focused on the false *character* of these heretics: arrogant, sensuous, and greedy. Only in one passing allusion—‘they seduce the unstable’ (v. 14)—did he say anything about the ‘teaching’ part of their profile. But now in verses 17-22, their impact on other people takes center stage. Their teaching, Peter claims is hollow, arrogant, and deceitful (vv. 17-19). At the same time, he returns to the theme of verse 4-10a as he warns these false teachers about the terrible judgment awaiting them. Indeed, because they have known the way of righteousness but have deliberately turned away from it, their fate will be all the worse (vv. 20-22). By ending his polemic on the same note of judgment with which he began, Peter again exhibits the ‘ring composition’ we have noted elsewhere in the letter.

1. Empty Promises (2:17)

¹⁷These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.

a) Dryness (2:17a)

¹⁷These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm.

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Moo: The two opening metaphors in verse 17 vividly capture the hollow and insubstantial nature of the false teachers' message. In the dry climate of the East, a spring of water is a marvelous blessing, giving—and sometimes even saving—life. Imagine a weary traveler's chagrin, then, when he or she finds the spring to be dry. So is the false teachers' message: it disappoints the spiritual pilgrim by promising spiritual vitality, but not delivering it. Like the people of Israel, the followers of these imposters 'have forsaken Me [the Lord], the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, cisterns that cannot hold water' (Jer. 2:13). We might at first think that the second metaphor, *mists driven by a storm* has a different meaning—perhaps indicating the false teachers' instability, blown hither and yon by any breeze of doctrine. But the word *mist* can also denote the haze left after the condensation of a cloud into rain. But rather than producing life-giving rain, it could dissipate and, indeed served as a harbinger of dry weather to come. (The Greek word, *homichle*, is rare, found only here in the Bible. The understanding of the word given [here] is based especially on a description in Aristotle.) The two metaphors, therefore, combine to characterize the message of the false teachers as hollow and therefore disillusioning.

Gardner: He also demonstrates the essential bankruptcy of their positions. They are *springs without water*. . . . a spring without water is worthless and ultimately has no purpose. This is the vacuous nature of these people Peter confronts. . . . *Mists driven by a storm*. We [need] storms to produce rain, not simply to blow mist around. The pictures Peter uses are vivid and understandable to us all.

MacArthur: In describing the false teachers, Peter chose two metaphors that represent water, the most essential natural commodity of the arid Middle East. Due to its relative scarcity and vital importance, water provided the perfect illustration of spiritual sustenance. . . . Thus, like mirages in the hot desert sand, Peter describes the false teachers as those who promise what they do not deliver. They are *springs without water*, offering the spiritually thirsty nothing more than false hopes of relief. They are also *mists driven by a storm*. In the eastern Mediterranean region, sea breezes periodically bring in mist and fog that appear to signal rain. But sometimes the atmospheric moisture stays only briefly and produces no significant rainfall. The land is left dry and parched; the inhabitants are left disappointed. Like those mists, false teachers are without substance and prove no life-changing refreshment (cp. Jude 12).

Helm: Every Christian ought to long for the Spirit and Word to water the world with gospel glory. And that is what makes Peter's tirade against false preachers so searching. These preachers were promising water, the refreshment of the Holy Spirit with all His good gifts and assurance. What they delivered instead was a deposit from an empty well. They lowered their buckets into the wellspring of their own self-delusion and pulled it back up in the presence of all the people. And when they poured it out before God's thirst flock, nothing except dry, gritty sand fell uselessly to the ground—no true refreshment and no soul satisfaction or invigorating relationship with God. Further, these men as *mists driven by a storm*. A mist promises rain. Farmers need rain; the ground needs soaking. But these false preachers deliver nothing more than a passing haze.

b) *Darkness (2:17b)*

For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.

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Moo: In language reminiscent of his earlier condemnation (see esp. vv. 4b, 10), Peter adds at the end of the verse a quick sentence of judgment.... In place of the momentary darkness which they now cast, there is prepared for them a much thicker and eternal one.

MacArthur: Peter did not hesitate to announce the terrible judgment that awaits false teachers, *for whom the black darkness has been reserved* (cp. Jude 13). The *black darkness* mentioned here refers to hell—the place of eternal punishment where both fire (Mt. 13:42; 25:41) and darkness (mt. 8:12; 22;13) coexist.

2. Enticing Pleasures (2:18)

¹⁸*For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error.*

a) Boasts (2:18a)

¹⁸*For, speaking loud boasts of folly...*

Moo: The *for* at the beginning of verse 18 connects both this verse and the next to verse 17. In these two verses, Peter explains why the false teachers are consigned to the darkness of hell (cp. v. 17b) and how they disillusion and harm people with their doctrine and practice (cp. v. 17a). Peter has already chastised them for their arrogance (v. 10), and he returns to that theme here. The false teachers *mouth empty, boastful words*. Peter indulges in some irony here, using the same Greek word for the false teachers' speech (*phthengomai*) as he has used to describe the speech of Balaam's donkey in verse 16. Even a donkey 'mouthed' better doctrine than these false teachers do! And this doctrine, while presented with a great show of power and persuasiveness is, in fact, *empty*. This word suggests the idea of futility or frustration—of something that can never quite attain its goal. Paul, for instance, uses the word to describe the 'futility' to which creation was subjected as a result of the fall of humanity into sin (Rom. 8:20).... The false teachers' words, while superficially attractive, cannot produce the spiritual fulfillment that they promise. Moreover, while the NIV does not preserve the connection, this first clause in verse 18 is linked to what is the main assertion in the verse: the false teachers entice people 'by mouthing, empty, boastful words.' (I am giving the participle *phthengomenoi* an instrumental force.)

Gardner: Teachers need to provide what is useful and edifying for a Christian congregation. These men mouth *empty and boastful words* of no use to anyone.

MacArthur: Despite the fact that they have no spiritual substance to offer, false teachers invariably claim great wisdom and knowledge—*speaking out arrogant words of vanity*. Through their flamboyant verbosity and high-sounding rhetoric, they fool their followers into believing that they possess deep theological scholarship, profound spiritual insight, and even direct revelations from God.

b) Bait (2:18b)

...they entice by sensual passions of the flesh...

Moo: The false teachers also entice *by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature*. The NIV is a rather free paraphrase of a difficult sequence of words in the Greek, which can be literally translated 'in desires of the flesh, acts of sensuality.' The NIV by 'appealing' is a fair and accurate addition. Not so happy is their rendering of the Greek word for *flesh* (*sarx*) with 'sinful human nature.' ... The use of the word 'nature' to translate this phrase can imply a view

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of the constitution of human beings that is only questionably biblical. The word ‘lustful’ represents the Greek word *aselgeia*, which Peter has already used twice in the chapter—once of the ‘shameful ways’ of the false teachers generally (v. 2) and once of the ‘filthy’ lifestyle of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 7). It denotes licentiousness, sensuality, a pleasure-focused lifestyle of sexual promiscuity, gluttony, and drunkenness. The word is plural here and is awkwardly tacked on to the end of the phrase.... The false teachers appeal to the sinful and licentious desires of people to entice them away from the truth. Thus Peter lists two means that the false teachers use to attract people to their brand of heresy, as Biggs puts it, ‘Grandiose sophistry is the hook, filthy lust the bait.’

Gardner: Nevertheless, they do know how to attract people to their ways. They simply play to the sinful nature—*appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature*. All are open to temptation and this fact was being exploited.

MacArthur: As in Peter’s day, contemporary false teachers use their empty, haughty speech to *entice* their listeners *by fleshly desire, by sensuality*. They do not care about bringing the truth to people’s minds; instead, they target people’s lusts—offering a carnal, feelings-oriented message that feeds the sensual instincts of its hearers.

c) *Barely Escaping (2:18c)*

...those who are barely escaping from those who live in error.

Moo: But the false teachers, Peter suggests, do not go after just anybody. Clever in picking their targets, they dangle their lure in front of *people who are just escaping from those who live in error*.... Some manuscripts read *ontos apophygontes*, others have *oligos apopheugontas*. Even without knowing any Greek, one can note how similar these two phrases are and how easy it would be for a scribe to change one of them to the other. If we accept the first alternative, the people whom the false teachers are entice are those who have ‘fully escaped’ from ‘those who live in error.’ The KJV adopts this reading, translating ‘those that were clean escaped from them who live in error.’ But the second reading is adopted by all the contemporary major English translations and should be accepted. It identifies the false teachers’ targets as people who had only ‘recently’ or ‘barely’ escaped ‘from those who live in error’; in fact, the present tense of the participle in this reading suggests that they are still in the process of escaping the entanglements of their past lives. It makes excellent sense to think that the heretics would go after new converts. The word *error (plane)* is regularly used in the Bible to describe paganism (see, e.g., Rom. 1:27; Titus 3:3). In other words, Peter pictures these new converts as still in the process of distancing themselves from the values and lifestyle of the pagan society to which they recently belonged and in the midst of which they continue to live.

Gardner: Two elements combined to make this early church particularly susceptible to such temptations to sexual sin. First, many of the congregation were *just escaping from those who live in error*. In other words, many were new converts from paganism. They had been used to such feasts and orgies and self-indulgence in their former non-Christian lives. No doubt they missed what they had left behind. To be told that such things were permissible left them specially open to seduction away from the truths of Scripture. Secondly, the congregation was facing a direct appeal to particular temptations to *lustful desires* that affected almost everyone. To be told that one of the most common and basic desires of the sinful human nature is actually admissible would be temptation indeed!

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MacArthur: Individuals who follow false teachers are *those who barely escape from the ones who live in error*. In other words, they are men and women who through moral resolution are trying to better themselves. They include people who struggle with broken relationships, wrestle with emotional ‘felt needs’ and spiritual problems, and desperately desire relief from guilt, anxiety, and stress. They are dissatisfied with the lifestyle of *the ones who live in error*—the average mass of unregenerate humanity—and seek some better way to live or some form of religious experience. But that does not mean they are truly redeemed. In fact, in their dissatisfaction, loneliness, and self-betterment attempts, they are highly vulnerable to the seductive exploitations of false teachers.

3. Enslaved People (2:19)

¹⁹*They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.*

a) Promise (2:19a)

¹⁹*They promise them freedom...*

Moo: In verse 19 Peter continues to describe the false teachers’ mode of operation. Another tactic to entice recent converts from their faith is to promise them freedom. This is about the only place in the chapter that Peter touches on the false teachers’ doctrinal program. Unfortunately, he is not specific: freedom from what? When one considers the evidence from the letter itself, three possibilities deserve to be considered. 1) The false teachers may have been promising freedom from fear of evil spiritual beings. Peter has criticized the heretics earlier in the chapter for their arrogance and unconcern with these beings (vv. 10b-12). 2). The false teachers may have been promising freedom from eschatological judgment. As both 1:16-21 and 3:3-12 show, the false teachers’ basic doctrinal plank was skepticism about the return of Christ and the judgment associated with His return. 3) They may have been advocating freedom from any external moral constraint. Peter has dwelt repeatedly on the false teachers’ libertine lifestyle (vv. 13-16, 18)... Since any of these views fits well into the broader context of 2 Peter 2, we must ask which fits best in the immediate context. Here the rest of verse 19 helps.

Gardner: In 1:4, Peter had talked of how Christians can ‘escape the corruption of this world caused by evil desires.’ This was the true freedom which Peter has in mind here. To be free from the corruption that our sinful human nature always seeks to draw us towards is freedom indeed. Hand in hand with this, for the Christian, goes a freedom from final judgment.

b) Prisoners (2:19b)

...but they themselves are slaves of corruption.

Moo: Peter points out the irony in the false teachers’ situation: while promising others freedom, *they themselves are slaves of depravity*. The emphatic *themselves* suggests that the *depravity* to which they are enslaved is closely related to the freedom they promise. But what is this *depravity*? The NIV makes a definitive interpretive decision in rendering the Greek word *phthora* with ‘depravity.’ A more neutral translation would be ‘corruption’ (found in most English versions). The corruption may be moral in nature (in which case depravity is a fair rendering) or it may be physical. Peter has used *phthora* twice before in this letter, once with each meaning. In 1:4, I argued it had a moral flavor; in 2:12, it refers to eschatological destruction. Neither definition fits very well with the idea that the false teachers promise freedom from evil spiritual beings, so this option out to be eliminated. But if the reference is to eschatological destruction

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the second option works well: while promising people freedom from judgment, the false teachers themselves are destined for judgment. And if moral corruption is intended, the third also makes good sense. The false teachers reveal the futility of their promise of freedom from moral requirements by living lives enslaved to immorality themselves. I think this last interpretation is slightly better than the other. The language of slavery in this verse and the focus on immorality in verse 20 suggest that Peter is thinking along these lines rather than in terms of eschatological judgment.

Gardner: But while they promise such freedom, these leaders are, in fact, mastered by their sinful nature, their *depravity* (the word otherwise translated as ‘corruption’ in 1:4 and refers to perishing in the final destruction of the world in 2:12). In other words, they remain slaves to another master (cp. Mt. 6:24).

MacArthur: In appealing to these people, false teachers promise freedom and victory while *they themselves are slaves of corruption*. Their empty guarantees include liberation, purpose, prosperity, peace, and happiness. Yet they do not even possess these blessings themselves.

c) Proverb (2:19c)

For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.

Moo: Peter reinforces the point by quoting a proverb: *A man is a slave to whatever has mastered him....* Peter applies it to the impersonal force of sin; thus the neuter rendering (found in almost all English versions) is better [than to a personal reference].

Gardner: These false teachers claimed to have freedom but in fact in not obeying Christ, found themselves serving their own selfish ends of depravity. They were so mastered by their depravity that they were even creating a theology to justify their behavior. Their lives reveal the lie they are promoting, again helping true believers recognize false teachers.

MacArthur: In fact, they are slaves to their lust, *for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved*. They are so thoroughly dominated and controlled by their sinful nature (Jn. 8:34; Rom. 6:16) that their teaching is void of any divine power. Although they offer freedom, they are slaves to sin, utterly unable to bestow true spiritual freedom because they reject Jesus Christ—the only One who can truly liberate the soul.

Sproul: When you declare your emancipation from the law of God, you are not free; you become a slave, which is Peter’s point in verse 19.

Helm: If you want to be free from any ethical imperative, preachers abound to satiate your desire. But in the depth of your heart, don’t you find Peter’s words true? Without the water of God’s Spirit dwelling within us, none of us possesses the internal strength to walk away from that which corrupts us. The alluring pull of sin is too strong.

C. Condemnation of False Teachers (2 Peter 2:20-22)

1. Predicament (2:20)

²⁰*For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.*

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Moo: The NIV preserves the ambiguity of the original by translating simply *they* at the beginning of the verse. What is unclear is the antecedent of this pronoun. We could go back to the end of verse 18: ‘people who are just escaping from those who live in error.’ ... But the closest antecedent is found in the subject of the immediately preceding verse, the false teachers. And it is these false teachers who have been Peter’s focus throughout the chapter.... We would expect the chapter to end with a final denunciation of the false teachers; a warning to recent converts seems out of place. Peter, then, continues his description of the false teachers.

Gardner: These last three verses talk of those who know Jesus but return to their former way of life. The first question to be addressed is whether Peter is referring to those new Christians (end of v. 18) who are being pulled back to their former ways of error, or to the false teachers themselves who have known Jesus but are now living as those entangled once again in a sinful life. While there is much to be said for either view, the flow of Peter’s argument throughout the chapter is that the false teachers will be indulged.... It seems likely that verses 20-22 should be taken as referring to the heretical teachers.

a) *Escape (2:20a)*

²⁰*For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...*

Moo: In 1:4, he said that Christians have ‘escaped the corruption [*phthora*] in the world’; in 1:3, he claimed that they have come to know our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. The false teachers, he now notes, have also *escaped the corruption [*miasmata*] of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.* (the word [*miasmata*] is found only here in biblical Greek but is closely related to the word Peter has used in verse 10, *miasmos*—NIV ‘corrupt’.) ... Peter is fond of the language of *knowledge* (in the biblical sense of experiential knowledge) to describe Christian experience. From his perspective at least, then, these false teachers give every evidence of being Christians.

Gardner: Were these people ever really committed to Christ as Lord? Is it assumed that they will now be judged by God? If so, how do we understand this Scripture in the light of other passages that indicate that once people belong to Christ they always belong to Him, for He both knows them and *keeps* them (e.g., Jn. 10:27-29; Rom. 8:30)? Indeed, the questions raised are not unlike those examined when looking at 2:1 earlier.... In Matthew 7:15-20 Jesus points out that trees that do not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. It becomes immediately clear, however, that such ‘trees’ are not actually *real* trees! (7:21-23).... Jesus’ description well fits the type of false prophets and teachers that Peter was facing. Such people will *appear* to be full Christians. They will know, in their head, at least, the whole truth of salvation. For a while they even may have genuinely moved to a different moral stance in which they could be said to ‘have escaped the corruption of the world.’ Indeed, by mixing among Christians they would have done that, surely. But now their true colors are emerging. They are to be known by their fruit. The reality of their apparently commitment to following Christ will be seen in the way they live and the teachings they propound, not simply by their claim to be Christians.

MacArthur: To be sure, the false teachers of Peter’s day were outwardly religious people. They had professed faith in Jesus Christ and probably convinced the people that they knew far more about Him than they actually did. Otherwise they would not have been able to infiltrate the church so effectively.... *Defilements*, or ‘pollution,’ is *miasma*, a transliterated word in English

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that conveys the same meaning as it does in Greek: ‘a vaporous exhalation formerly believed to cause disease...an influence or atmosphere that tends to deplete or corrupt.’ The debauched system of *the world* produces, as it were, poisonous vapors, infectious evils, and moral pollutions in every conceivable form. Unsaved humanity is heavily contaminated by the world’s immorality and vanity, and some, such as those who become false teachers, seek to escape it. They do so *by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*, finding provisional shelter in the church. Such *knowledge* is an accurate awareness *about* Christ, but it is not a saving knowledge *of* Him. Thus their efforts ultimately result in nothing more than temporary and superficial moral reform through religion—the religion of minimal Christianity devoid of genuine faith and repentance.

b) *Entangle (2:20b)*

...they are again entangled in them and overcome...

Moo: Yet they run the risk of becoming *entangled* in the corruption of the world again, and, indeed, of being *overcome* by it.... Peter’s point is that such a return to the corrupt lifestyle of the world will bring disaster to them.

Gardner: Peter says these people, then, have become *entangled* again in the corruption and have been *overcome*. The picture reminds us of those Jesus describes in the parable of the sower who were swamped by the thorns of this world (‘worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things,’ Mk. 4:19).

MacArthur: It is evident that false teachers are not really in Christ because *they are again entangled in* the world’s defilements *and are overcome*. They are not the ‘overcomers’ the apostle John wrote about in his first epistle (1 Jn. 5:4-5) or the book of Revelation (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21).

c) *Exacerbate (2:20c)*

...the last state has become worse for them than the first.

Moo: *They are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.* Peter is almost certainly quoting Jesus’ saying at the end of His story about the evil spirit in Matthew 12:43-45.... So it is with people who embrace Christ but then abandon Him for the world again. Because they have knowingly and openly rejected the truth, their judgment will be worse than it would otherwise have been. This is what Peter explains in verse 21.

MacArthur: Since there is no real salvation for them—no grace received to overcome the power of sin (Eph. 1:7), walk by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:12-13; Eph. 2:8-10), and persevere in the faith (Phil. 2:12-13; 2 Th. 1:11-12)—they sink back into the pollution of the world and completely reject the gospel of salvation. *This last state is much worse for them than the first.* After all, those who understand the truth and still turn away will face far greater judgment than those who have never heard (cp. Mt. 10:14-15; 11:22-24; Mk. 6:11; Lk. 12:47-48).

d) *Explanation*

Moo: Peter here uses language to describe the false teachers that he elsewhere uses to depict conversion to Christianity. They have *escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. Yet, in the same verse, Peter claims that if they persist in the heretical path they have chosen, *they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning*. What being *worse off* means becomes clear when we compare what Peter says about their fate in 2:4-

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10a: they will suffer eschatological condemnation. A first ‘reading’ ... then seems to teach that genuine Christians can permanently fall away from their faith if they persist in holding heretical ideas and/or in pursuing a sinful lifestyle.

Moo: I bring to this passage a generally Calvinistic theological perspective. I was taught eternal security in seminary, and I have since that time found many texts that seem to me to confirm its truthfulness. In addition to the well-known passages from the Gospel of John (especially John 6:39-40; 10:28), I am particularly impressed by Paul’s arguments in Romans 5-8, where Paul mounts an argument for Christian assurance. Those who have been justified, he teaches, will be saved on the last day (5:9-10). Those who have been predestined, called, and justified are glorified (8:30). He asserts what seems to me to be an unbreakable connection between initial justification and final salvation; indeed, his doctrine of justification is itself eschatological, the ultimate verdict of God being rendered over the believer at the moment of conversion.

Moo: Because my belief about eternal security rests on serious study of the text, I first seek ways of explaining these text [that appear to conflict] in a way that can fit my ‘theological context.’ Three options come to mind. 1) Perhaps the warnings are only hypothetical.... On this view, the biblical authors warn true believers of what the consequences of their persistent apostasy will be—knowing all the time that such apostasy is not possible. 2) Perhaps the people are not really being warned about eschatological condemnation. Peter...may simply mean that the false teachers will experience serious problems in this life and maybe ‘loss of reward’ in the next. 3) Perhaps the people being warned are not really Christians at all. Peter says that the false teachers have a *knowledge* of Christ, but this may be no more than head knowledge. They may be people who have participated in the life of the church, have given every indication of being Christian, but have never actually experienced God’s regenerative work.

Moo: Most Calvinist scholars take this last tack.... And I think this approach is far superior to the other two. A hypothetical warning is not of much use.... Neither is it satisfactory to think that these warning passages hold out only temporal penalties. In 2 Peter 2:20-22, for instance, being in a worse position than before conversion can only refer to eschatological condemnation. Thus I turn to the third option, that the false teachers were never really Christians at all.

2. Pronouncement (2:21)

²¹*For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.*

Moo: He again uses *way* language to describe Christianity (see the comments on 2:15). Following Christ means to walk the road of right behavior (*righteousness*) that He demands of His disciples. It would be better, Peter warns, not even to enter that road than to walk it for a time and then abandon it. Peter’s focus on the moral failings of the false teachers surfaces here again. Not only does he use *righteousness* (in a moral sense) to describe the *way* of Christianity, but he also singles out *the sacred command that was passed on to them* as that which they have abandoned. Peter does not have a single *command* in mind here. He uses the singular to summarize the totality of Christian instruction, a traditional body of teaching that was taught (and thus *passed on*) to converts.

Gardner: Such people are worse off than those who had never *known the way of righteousness*. And again we see Peter surely drawing upon the teachings of Jesus to which he will refer in 3:2. He uses almost the same words as Jesus used in Matthew 12:45 when he was talking of a demon

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being cast out of a person.... Judgement will surely be worse for those who hear and know the truth and then deliberately *turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them*, than it will be for the pagan who has never known. This *command* refers to the whole gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ that has been passed to them.

MacArthur: The way of righteousness is the Christian faith. Because of the greater condemnation they face, false teachers would be better off not hearing about Scripture and doctrine than, having contemplated it, to reject it. Their insincere consideration of the gospel gives them access to divine teaching in God's Word, *the holy commandment*. But they ultimately renounce Christ and His saving truth. Thus, they spurn the only true way of salvation and are subsequently left without any hope of eternal life.

3. Proverb (2:22)

²²*What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."*

a) Context

Moo: Peter has composed verses 20-22 almost entirely out of traditional material: a saying of Jesus in verse 20, a 'better for them' warning in verse 21 (such as we find elsewhere in the New Testament), and now, in verse 22, two extrabiblical proverbs. In fact, the NIV plural *proverbs* is a bit of a liberty. The Greek word is singular. Peter perhaps uses it because he views the two proverbs as functioning together to make the same point. And combining proverbs that speak of both dogs and pigs also makes good sense. Jews viewed both animals negatively. Dogs in the ancient Near East were not 'man's best friend.' They were not mild-mannered house pets but wild and savage beasts that often stole food and preyed on weak people. And of course pigs were anathema, declared 'unclean' in the Old Testament and avoided by pious Jews. Dogs and pigs were thus often grouped together as despised animals (cp. Jesus' command: 'do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs,' Mt. 7:6).

MacArthur: In biblical times, dogs and swine were both contemptible animals (cp. Job 30:1; Ps. 22:16; Mt. 7:6; Lk. 16:21). Dogs, for instance, were rarely kept as household pets because they were usually half-wild mongrels—often dirty, diseased, and dangerous (cp. 1 Kgs. 14:11; 21:19, 23-24; Is. 56:11; Rev. 22:15). They lived on garbage and refuse, and were even willing to eat their *own vomit*. It is not surprising, then, that the Jews treated dogs with contempt and disgust. Swine similarly represented filth, being the ultimate in uncleanness to the Jews (cp. Lk. 15:15-16). This was primarily because the Mosaic law declared them ceremonially unclean (Lev. 11:7; Dt. 14:8). Peter's comparison, then, is unmistakable: false teachers are the epitome of spiritual uncleanness and smut.

Sproul: These are crude metaphors, but we need only remember that Peter began by calling these people 'brute beasts' (v. 12). Dog were not household pets among the Jews; they were despised scavengers. They were the lowest form of wildlife, and Peter does not hesitate to describe the heretics as being like them. Jews also despised swine, and Peter likens the false teachers to those animals as well.

b) Content

Moo: The meaning of the first proverb is clear enough: returning to the corruption of the world is like a dog returning to eat its own vomit. But the saying about the pig (NIV 'sow') can be taken in two different senses, depending on how we put together the Greek syntax. One possibility is

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to translate, ‘A sow that washes itself by wallowing in the mire.’ Peter would then be suggesting that the false teachers, having gotten a taste for depravity, come to enjoy it; they are like pigs who, it is well known, love to wash in mud. But all the major English translations and most commentators opt for the reading represented in the NIV: *A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud.* This proverb fits precisely the situation of the false teachers as Peter has depicted in verses 20-21: having been washed clean by the blood of Christ, they are nevertheless anxious to return again to the filth of the world.

Gardner: The sayings, no doubt well known to Peter’s audience are clear enough. A dog vomits and returns to its vomit. A pig may appear to wash itself in clean water only to return very soon to the mud from which it came. Neither animal would have been highly regarded in those days, and again it reminds us of Peter’s earlier statements that these false leaders are like *brute beasts* (v. 12). Undoubtedly they are empty and useless.

Sproul: The filth of a pigsty is almost indescribable. Farmers hose off the mud-caked pigs, but no sooner is their skin clean and pinkly shining than they run back to the mud for another roll. The mud is a pig’s natural environment. That is the nature of the brutes who lead the sheep of Christ astray. They entice people to leave the truth of God for a greater liberty, and the freedom they find ends in vomit and mud.

For next time: Read 2 Peter 3:1-10.

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Lesson Summary

XVIII. Brute Beasts (2 Peter 2:10b-22)

Aim: To recognize the characteristics of false teachers and their teaching, to avoid being enticed by their sinful lifestyles and heretical doctrines, and to escape the defilements of this world and the destruction that they bring.

A. Characteristics of False Teachers (2:10b-16)

Peter gives a scathing indictment of the false teachers, focusing on what they say with their mouths, see with their eyes, and seek with their hearts, ending with a reference to Balaam as the prime Old Testament example of what he has been saying.

1. What They Say with Their Mouths (2:10b-12a)

- They are *bold and willful*; they *blaspheme (blasphēmēō) the glorious ones*; i.e., they don't show proper respect for angelic beings (likely fallen angels)
- In contrast, 'good' *angels, though greater in might and power*, do not blaspheme them; thus demonstrating the arrogance of the false teacher's speech
- They are like brute beasts, *irrational animals, creatures of instinct*,
- They blaspheme *about matters of which they are ignorant*
- Like brute beasts who are *born to be caught and destroyed*, they will *also be destroyed in their destruction*
- *Suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing*; the wages of their sin is death

2. What They See with Their Eyes (2:13b-14)

- They *revel in the daytime*; shameless behavior; they even conduct this behavior at church feasts
- They are *blots and blemishes*; the church is to be without spot or blemish (2 Pe. 3:14); ('blot' *spiloi* & 'spotless' *aspiloi*; 'blemishes' *momoi* & 'blameless' *amometoi*)
- *They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin*
- *They entice unsteady souls*; they seduce weak people by the lure/bait of sensuality

3. What They Seek with their Hearts (2:15-16)

- *They have hearts trained (gumnazō) in greed (pleonexia)*; they work hard at it
- They are *accursed children*; i.e., they are characterized by being cursed, not blessed
- *Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray*; they are apostate, following *the way of Balaam, who loved gain from wrongdoing*; Balaam was rebuked by his donkey—even a brute beast had more spiritual discernment than this prophet whose mouth, eyes, and heart were focused only on himself and his pleasure

B. Characteristics of False Teaching (2:17-19)

Peter describes the impact of the false teachers' teaching: it contains empty promises that cannot deliver, it entices people through sensuality, and it enslaves the teachers and their followers, because true freedom is found only in Jesus Christ.

1. Empty Promises (2:17)

- They are *waterless springs and mists driven by a storm*; they cannot deliver what they promise; they are spiritually dry and empty; they will be *reserved for darkness*

2. Enticing Pleasures (2:18)

- They are foolish and boastful; *they entice by sensual passions*; their targets are new or weak believers who are struggling to separate themselves from the world

3. Enslaved People (2:19)

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- Although *they promise them freedom* (from God's law or judgment), they themselves are *enslaved* by their sinful passions and lusts (cp. Mt. 6:24)

C. Condemnation of False Teachers (2:20-22)

The false teachers are apostates who have been exposed to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, yet have returned to the entanglement of worldly pleasures. Their condemnation is severe; in knowingly rejecting the truth, their punishment will be worse than for pagans who never heard the gospel.

1. Predicament (2:20)

- They seem *have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*; i.e., they have made 'profession of faith'
- However, they *again entangled* in their sinful lusts *and overcome* by them
- Thus, they are worse off now at the end than they were at the beginning

2. Pronouncement (2:21)

- It is better *never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back*; punishment for knowingly rejecting Christ is greater than for gospel ignorance

3. Proverb (2:22)

- *The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire*; the false teachers have returned to the world's corruption

In 2 Peter 2:10b-22, Peter strongly denounces the false teachers. In verses 10b-16, he describes their activities and passions via what they say with their mouths, see with their eyes, and seek with their hearts. They are bold, willful, blasphemous, ignorant brute beasts, who desire only to fulfill their own lusts and passions, which will end up destroying them. They engage in revelry and sensuality, seeing to entice others into the same lifestyle. Whereas Christians are called to be spotless and blameless, they are blots and blemishes, accursed children. They have trained their hearts for greed and have forsaken the way of righteousness, instead following the way of Balaam, the paragon of false prophets. He himself was no better than a brute beast, being rebuke by the speech of his donkey.

In verses 17-19, Peter exposes the futility of their false teaching. While it is full of promises, it ultimately disappoints because it cannot bring any spiritual refreshment. Thus, the gloom of utter darkness has been prepared for them. They are foolish and ignorant of the truth; they entice others who are not knowledgeable by the lure of sinful passions. They make promises of freedom (from judgment, from being required to keep God's law) that they are unable to deliver, because they themselves are enslaved by corruption.

Finally, in verse 20-22, Peter strongly condemns the false teachers. Although they have apparently made a profession of faith through the knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord, they have not escaped the defilement of this world because it was a false profession. In fact, they have become so entangled in their sinful lifestyle that they are worse off than they were originally. They are under more serious judgment and condemnation, having rejected the gospel, than they would have been had they never heard it at all. They are like dogs returning to their own vomit, or swine returning to the mud, rejecting the truth for the corrupt pleasures of this world which will ultimately end with their destruction.