

A Hollow Pretense

II Peter 2:17-22

Several weeks ago you may recall that on a Wednesday night a big storm blew through the area. It happened shortly after prayer meeting as I was heading for home. Strong winds and torrential driving rains made it difficult to see while driving. An occasional bolt of lightning instantaneously lit up the sky causing momentary blindness making the commute even more challenging.

In due time the rains and winds subsided as the storm passed. As I was backing out of the garage the following morning I noticed something I had not seen in the darkness of the night before when I arrived home. Lying in the middle of our yard was a huge limb that had broken off from our neighbor's tree about 20 feet up the tree. It's a large Maple tree with a huge base from which four large shoots ascend to a towering height.

Over the weekend I set about clearing the limb. I cut off all the branches piling them up to take back and burn. Then I took the chain saw to cut up the remaining 50 feet or so of the fallen limb. The outside had a beautifully thick bark that graced the stately tree. You can see from this sample that the inside looks to be solid and healthy, but as I cut my way down to where the limb broke off even though the outside gives the appearance of being healthy, the inside was hollow, rotted out from who knows what. In the strong winds the storm snapped it off leaving a mess for me to clean up.

That is the essence of Peter's closing remarks in chapter 2 of our passage about the true nature of false teachers. The perception they give on the outside leaves their audience with the impression that they are stalwarts of the faith. Remember that just a few verses earlier (v. 13) Peter said they even attended and participated in communion. They had all the right words, made all the right gestures, seemed to know what they were talking about, but as we will see today everything about them was

hollow, a thin veneer designed to deceive and seduce listeners away from the truth and with the intention of purposefully exploiting them.

The dictionary defines hollow as something having an empty space, or only air, having a cavity inside. It continues a few entries later by defining hollow as being empty or worthless; not real or meaningful.

A balloon is hollow

A basketball is hollow

A boat pontoon is hollow

A cave is hollow

A tire is hollow

A tooth cavity is hollow. The surface may look normal and healthy, but an x-ray reveals decay that causes the tooth to rot from the inside out.

Notice first that their preaching is hollow.

I. THEIR PREACHING IS HOLLOW – vs. 17-18

In verse 17 Peter uses two analogies to help us understand the true nature of what false teachers are like and concludes with a word of condemnation about them and their final destiny.

He says they “are springs without water and mists driven by a storm.”

People who have spent days in the desert with little water to quench their thirst describe the delusion of seeing a mirage. In the distance they see a pool of water. Excitedly they hurry to the spot of the mirage only to find just a sea of sand.

A tired and thirsty traveler comes to a river bed expecting to find the refreshing flow of water only to see that it is dried up.

A farmer may wake up one morning gazing out his kitchen window and notice a mist with clouds hanging in the sky. There may even be the sound of thunder that rattles the window pane. It gives the appearance of much needed rain coming to quench his thirsty crops, but his hopes are soon dashed as

the winds drive the clouds and mist off to taunt another farmer.

False teachers preach words offering salvation through a source of water that neither refreshes nor satisfies. They are hollow words, empty words, deceptive words, words that have no substance, no eternal value. They give false hope. Their words are like giving an empty glass to a parched throat. "Follow me", they say, "and find peace for your longing soul."

In John 4 Jesus talked with a woman at a well in Samaria. She had tried all kinds of wells to satisfy her soul. She tried the well of religiosity by worshipping in Samaria at Mt. Gerazim believing that this mountain was especially sacred. Both Abraham and Jacob had built altars to God in that general area. The Samaritan Scriptures taught that Mt. Gerazim was a place Moses commanded an altar to be built. In Deuteronomy 11:29 the Israelites proclaimed blessings. On this mountain the Samaritans built their temple. She was taught by religious leaders to worship there.

False teachers will lead others to worship God on another mountain, any mountain, other than where or how He should be worshipped. They say it's okay to worship over here or over there or worship that because it's like worshipping God.

Worship nature, because God is in nature.

Worship your career, because God instituted work.

Worship leisure, because God bids us to rest.

Worship pleasure, because God wants us to be happy.

Worship whatever you want in the way you want, it doesn't really matter, God is all around you.

She worshipped where she was told God resided.

She tried the well of pleasure. Not satisfied with one husband, she had been married to five different men and Jesus confronted her with the fact that the man she living with wasn't even her husband.

We'll see in a moment that these false teachers appealed to the lustful desires of the sinful human

flesh telling them that true freedom was found in doing whatever you wanted because you were no longer bound by God's law. Somewhere along the way, she came to believe that she could drink freely from the well of pleasure. It didn't satisfy.

Hedonism is just as much a religion or cult as any other like Hinduism or Buddhism or Hare Krishna or atheism for that matter teaching its followers that indulging the flesh is normal and worshipful. But they all end up headed in the same wrong direction following what is both empty and deceptive.

That's idea behind Peter's use of dry river beds and rainless clouds. Both are empty and deceptive. Any attempt to drink from the spring or be refreshed by rainless clouds other than through following Christ results in a hollowness that can never be filled.

Only in Christ can there be real refreshment as He told the Samaritan woman. Drink from any other well and you will always be thirsty. Drink from any other well and you will never be satisfied. Drink from the water of life that Christ gives and you will never be thirsty again. His living water provides salvation in its fullness, forgiveness of all the stain and guilt of sin.

John W. Peterson aptly depicts the spiritual condition of those who follow their own barren wasteland and when they drink from the living water in these lyrics.

I thirsted in the barren land of sin and shame,
And nothing satisfying there I found;
But to the blessed cross of Christ one day I came,
Where springs of living water did abound.

Drinking at the springs of living water,
Happy now am I, my soul they satisfy;
Drinking at the springs of living water,
O wonderful and bountiful supply!

John MacArthur notes "The Old Testament uses the metaphor of living water to describe the spiritual cleansing and new life that comes at salvation

through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Disobedient Israel was guilty of having foolishly “forsaken [God], the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water” (Jeremiah 2:13).

Drink from any well other than Jesus for salvation and you will find it a brook without water and clouds without rain.

For their hollow teaching Peter says that the “blackest darkness” is reserved for them.

We all know what it’s like to be in a room after the lights are turned off. Though it starts out pitch black, in time our eyes become accustomed to the darkness and we begin to make out some shapes and objects. Close your eyes tight and shut out the light and there is still a degree or variation of light that is noticeable. Wave your hand in front of your closed eyes and you can distinguish a variation in darkness. Cup your hands over your closed eyes and it gets even darker. I can’t say for sure but I wonder if a blind person can sense some degree of difference standing in the sunlight vs. darkness.

What Peter describes here is a degree of judgment that is reserved especially for false teachers. Reserved for them because of their deceptive teaching is darkness so deep the eye will never adjust. There will be complete and utter darkness such as never can be experienced now. Maybe this darkness is for the spiritual darkness they blind others with.

This darkness is a reference to the final judgment of hell where coexisting together is both the eternal, punishing flames of hell (Matthew 13:42; 25:41) and utter darkness (Matthew 8:12; 22:13).

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis describes this scene. The narrator of the story found himself in the suburbs of hell waiting at a bus stop. Everything around him was drab and dingy. The surroundings were very depressing. The other people waiting at the stop were quarrelsome. When

the bus came it was ablaze with light. It had come to take them to the suburbs of heaven, but when they arrived they didn’t like it. What piqued his interest was the conversation on the bus drawing his attention to darkness. The man seated next to him was full of ideas. His plan was to get everyone in the grim city to live together instead of spreading out over the million square miles of empty streets. He believed there was safety in numbers. It was the first time the narrator felt there was something to fear in the gray city.

Another clue of unrest in that grim place was the mention of houses. Although they were virtually useless they were better than nothing for safety. When he asked for an explanation, the man said that before long it was going to get dark. Real dark! No one down there wanted to get caught outdoors when the darkness came because that is when “THEY” come out. The narrator never learned who “THEY” were because it was going to get dark.

John Philips writes “That is what awaits the apostates – ‘the mist of darkness’ that is ‘reserved for ever’. There is something incredibly terrifying and menacing about the thought of ending up in another world under divine judgement in ‘the black night of utter darkness.’”

II Peter 2 has dealt with the kinds of tactics false teachers use to entice others. Notice that there are two appeals used by false teachers.

They appeal to the head and to the heart.

They appeal to the head with boastful words, words that have no value.

“They mouth empty, boastful words.”

The Message reads “they are loudmouths, full of hot air.”

Essentially Peter is saying that they have a lot of nothing to say. They know how to fill the room with lots of words that have no substance. Basically they just talk on and on about things. Their teaching is very vague. They wax on in order to

deceive others by their many words and then they brag about themselves in the process.

In I Corinthians 2:4-5 Paul said that he did not preach with enticing words of man's wisdom so that their faith would be on God's power not on man's words of persuasion.

In II Corinthians 4:5 Paul said "We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord." In other words, Paul didn't bring attention to himself when he preached, He proclaimed Christ alone. Instead of preaching about Christ, false teachers were boasted about themselves. We learned in v. 1 that they denied Christ and in v. 10 they despised Christ. So what else do they have to talk about except themselves? They talk about some nebulous esoteric experience they claim to have had that brought them some enlightenment about God. Their personal revelation should compel others to listen.

Take for example Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormons who alleged to have found the ancient Urim and Thummin worn by the High priest in the Old Testament, which he put in a hat claiming that the angel Moroni then helped him in decoding the Book of Mormon.

False teachers are everywhere ready to dupe the unsuspecting into a false teaching. I read an excerpt this past week about a pastor who had been invited to another country by a missionary to help conduct evangelistic meetings. What he described is nothing short of scandalous. As the message was wrapping up an invitation was given and those interested in hearing more about the gospel and being saved were invited to go to another room where counselors would be waiting to talk to them about the Lord. The members of a cult in that city would wait outside and target those coming out carrying new convert or discipleship material and engage them in conversation. These people who had just heard a message that prompted them to seek Christ were emotionally vulnerable and spiritually immature. These cult followers would lead them astray. They may have been wrestling with the depths and

degradation of sin. They were susceptible, even gullible to the boastful and hollow words of these cult members whose intention was to lead them from the truth.

Jeremiah 5:31 describes them as speaking lies. In 23:16 he says they fill you with false hopes and in 23:26 false prophets lie by prophesying the delusions of their own minds.

False teachers not only appeal to the head, they also appeal to the heart.
"Appealing to the lustful desires of sinful humans"

We read in Isaiah 30:10 that it was the people who didn't want to hear the truth requesting that they teach about pleasant things and safe spaces.

Zechariah 10:2 describes those who follow the words of false teachers as wandering sheep.

But if they can't lure you with what they say, they'll entice you with they say you can do. They appeal to the heart or to fleshly desires. In v. 14 we saw that they seduce the unstable or spiritually immature encouraging their appetite for lusting after things. Bear in mind that this lust isn't just some type of sexual perversion, it can be a lust for power or a lust for fame or a position, or a lust for, well, anything. They teach a health, wealth, and prosperity message. They appeal to the heart, enticing the person back into the sins they just left.

What does Peter say about them? "They are springs without water and mists driven by a storm." It's all just hollow preaching.

Ira Sankey who led the singing for D. L. Moody's evangelistic crusades wrote in his song titled "None But Christ Can Satisfy!" these lyrics.

I tried the broken cisterns, Lord,
But ah! the waters failed;
Even as I stooped to drink, they fled,
And mocked me as I wailed.

Just as Jeremiah stated, these false teachers offer

broken cisterns that can hold no water. Why, you might ask? It's because not only is their preaching hollow their practices are hollow as well.

II. THEIR PROMISES ARE HOLLOW – vs. 19, 22

In 1991 Robin Williams, played the character of Peter Pan in Steven Spielberg's movie "Hook". Years earlier he left Neverland giving up his playful, youthful innocence to become a corporate lawyer. His extremely busy life often found him making promises to his son Jack that he didn't keep even though he repeatedly said "my word is my bond". In short I promise, promises he never keeps.

That's the nature of false teachers, making promises they cannot keep. In verse 19 we see that they promise freedom, while at the same time they themselves are slaves of depravity.

To the Galatians Paul wrote that believers have been called to freedom but that we aren't to use that freedom to indulge the sinful nature and yet that is exactly what false teachers taught. They were free to indulge the flesh. Instead of teaching a pursuit of holiness they taught a pursuit of sinfulness all in the name of freedom.

Peter is most likely referring to moral freedom. In v. 2 we saw that many will follow their shameful ways and in v. 13 they caroused in broad daylight, even at gatherings designed to express Christian love. They taught that freedom in Christ really meant a person could do as they pleased. False teachers teach and live what is antithetical to what Christ taught about holiness and how He Himself lived.

In Romans 6 Paul asked and answered his own question. "Should we continue sinning so that grace can increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it (sin) any longer?"

On Wednesdays we are discussing justification, that one time act in which God renders a not guilty verdict because of our faith which credits the

righteousness of Christ to us. Faith in Christ makes it so God sees us as without sin because He sees us clothed in Christ.

In justification God sees us as holy, without sin. If that is our position, then I believe the ongoing application of justification is allowing the work of the Holy Spirit to help us so we don't sin in practice. Freedom in Christ doesn't make it so we can do what we want, whenever we want. Justification makes it so we don't want to sin. In that there is real freedom. But that's not what these false teachers were saying. They taught that true freedom allows you to do whatever you want because you are free. What they teach tugs at the heart of the old nature. It's a Burger King kind of religion where you can have it your way.

Personal holiness should be the order of the day not practicing hedonism.

Paul taught in Galatians 5:16 that if we walk or live by the Spirit you won't fulfill the lustful desires of the flesh. His indwelling, empowering presence helps us not to sin.

Peter taught in I Peter 1:16 that we are to be holy as God is holy. That means we bear responsibility and accountability in that pursuit.

John wrote in I John 3:3 that we are to purify ourselves just as Christ is pure.

To the Ephesians and Colossians Paul stated that we are to put off the conduct of the old nature and practice the conduct of someone who is a new creation in Christ because we have a new nature. They are diametrically opposed to one another.

They justified their own sinful actions by teaching that it's okay for to do as they do.

Understand that all false teachers can promise is a hollow freedom. How do we know that? It's by what Peter says next about false teachers. "They themselves are slaves of depravity – for a man is a slave to whatever has master him." The very thing they said would bring freedom was actually what

had them enslaved.

In 2:3, 14 they were slaves to money

In 2:10, 14 they were slaves to lust

In 2:10-12 they were slaves to pride

They were caught in their own web of deception.

Beware of empty promises.

They promise liberty, but a liberty that ensnares.

They promise life, but a life that is empty.

Lured by the promises of Pleasure Island Pinocchio was led with other boys who went there believing they were free from rules when in actuality it held them in a terrible curse. The freedoms they were given became the shackles that enslaved them.

Verse 22 sums up Peter's point on the true nature of false teachers. He likens their character to dogs and pigs. Both were despised by Jews. Dogs were scavengers not the adorable, loveable pets that we have today. You know the one's people like to take to the doggy salon to get their coats primped and nails painted. They weren't the kind of pets you take out and buy silly costumes for and dress up.

A dog is a dog is a dog, just as a pig is a pig is a pig. Dog's will do what dogs do. Here the dog returns to its vomit. A dog will eat something he shouldn't, throw it up, feel better and invariably within a short time go back and eat it again. It's disgusting, even revolting – but that is its nature.

A pig can get hosed down and cleaned up and in time will return to wallow in the mud.

Years ago I was helping a friend who had a large pig farm. My job was to squeegee out the pens and push all the slop down a trough into a holding tank. The concrete tank was about 8' long by 4' wide and maybe 5' deep. It took a lot to fill it up. On a hot summer day I was helping him and found that one of the sows had gotten out and wandered over to the holding tank which was full. The heat made the top crust over and the 250 pound pig thought she could walk across. When we found her, her face was all that was sticking out. We got some boards wedged

in the tank to help her out, hosed her down in the pen and she went back to her mud hole.

Here's what John Phillips writes: "Those who make an outward profession of religion without a Spirit-controlled inner transformation will soon return to their old way of life. Dogs and pigs do what they do naturally; evil people will return to their natural inclination toward sin and thereby face judgment."

J. I. Packer states "The merely reformed character often returns to sin, but the saved sinner who backslides returns to the Shepherd of souls."

Walvoord and Zuck in their commentary make the following remark: "Temporary reformation without true repentance and rebirth only leads to greater sin and judgment. Reformation only cleans up the outside, but regeneration changes the inside."

Essentially they say the same thing. Without a true change of heart brought about by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit only produces shallow results. The person who is not genuinely saved will inevitably return to his or her former sinful lifestyle. Why, because that's their nature.

Paul states in Titus 3:5 that it is the Holy Spirit who regenerates and renews. It can't be done by works. It can't be done in our own power. It can't be done by following any other religion. Only in Christ can there be a true transformation of the heart and the desire of the new creation in Christ will be to strive toward holiness in character that is only possible through a life yielded to the Holy Spirit's work.

False teachers promise regeneration through a host of things: meditation, free living, charitable giving, secret knowledge and the like. What they offer does not bring freedom, it enslaves.

Their preaching was hollow.

Their promises were hollow.

That means that the direction they are taking is also hollow.

Their path is hollow.

III. THEIR PATH IS HOLLOW – vs. 20-21

False teachers have false lips offering false liberty and a false life. They are leading people down the wrong path in the wrong direction.

In the 1929 Rose Bowl, Roy Riegels played for the University of California, Berkley football team. He was an All-American first team athlete and team captain. Playing both offense and defense Riegel picked up a fumble and began to run the 30 yards distance to the opposing team's goal line. Getting bumped around by avoiding tackles he lost his bearings and began to run toward his team's goal line instead, 70 yards away. One of his teammates caught up with him on the 3 yard line and started to turn him around when the opposing team of Georgia Tech players tackled him on the 1 yard line. UC Berkley opted to punt only to have it blocked in the end zone for a safety. In spite of a great second half, UC Berkley lost 8-7. He was budded Roy "Wrong Way" Riegel in a game often cited as the worst blunder in college football history.

These false teachers had at one time heard the gospel, perhaps even had a head knowledge of believing it that resulted in a temporary change in character. Eventually though, their true nature came out and they returned to their former way of life. In verse 21 we see that a person who hears and understands the gospel message bears a greater responsibility and stiffer judgment if he then hardens his heart and rejects the only true path to eternal life. What false teachers teach others causes them to veer off the right path and go in the wrong direction. They are worse off in the end. No matter how much effort others try in turning them around, their minds are made up.

It's my belief that this person was not saved at all in the first place, merely gave an intellectual assent to the gospel. Jude 19 says they don't have the Spirit and in Romans 8:9 Paul says that anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ. Many who believe they are on the right path

are actually on the broad path that leads to destruction, deceived by false teachers claiming to share the truth.

False teachers are not what they claim to be.

Their preaching is hollow.

Their promises are hollow.

Their path is hollow.

Peter gives us a threefold warning. The first warning is in order to identify the characteristics of false teachers. *Identify false teachers by their character.*

The second warning is for us to make sure we are not following them. *Intentionally avoid false teachers because they lead astray.*

The third warning is to all we can to intentionally try and steer others back in the right direction. *Inform others of the truth.*

Let me close with some questions for thought.

The first question is this: Are you on the right path? If you find you're on the wrong path led by hollow teaching, what do you need to do to get on the right path?

Confess your sins and trust Christ as Savior.

If you know you're on the right path, what are you doing to help get people to join you?

False teachers may look good and smell good and talk good, but their ways are hollow. Make sure you're not a victim. As Jesus said, know the truth because the truth will set you free and He backed it up by saying that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. You can only get to the Father through Him.