

# Better Never to Have Known the Way

by John Piper

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*John Piper warns against the dangers of false teachers who promise freedom but lead believers into deeper bondage and destruction.*

**Duration:** 38:46

**Scripture:** 2 Peter 2:10

**Topics:** "False Teachers"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on four sections of the Bible passage. The first section, from verse 10 to the first half of verse 13, highlights the brazen willfulness and proud self-sufficiency of false teachers. The second section, from the second half of verse 13 to verse 16, discusses the unashamed indulgence in sex and the love of money by these false teachers. The third section, verse 17, exposes the emptiness of their teaching, comparing them to waterless springs and mists driven by the storm. The final section, verses 18 to 22, warns about the consequences of being enticed away from the way of righteousness by false teachers. The speaker emphasizes the importance of teaching children about sexual temptation and grounding ourselves in God's truth to protect against false teachings. The sermon also highlights the eternal consequences at stake in choosing to rely on Christ and walk in righteousness or deny Him through immorality.

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## Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org). 2 Peter 2, verse 10. Peter is continuing to describe the false teachers we have heard about in the past weeks, and he says this about them.

Bold and willful, they are not afraid to rebel the glorious ones. Whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a reviling judgment upon them before the Lord. But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed, reviling in the matters of which they are ignorant, will be destroyed in the same destruction with them, suffering wrong for their wrongdoing.

They count it pleasure to rebel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their dissipation, carousing with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin.

They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed, accursed children. Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray.

They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked from his own transgression. A dumb ass spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness. They are waterless springs and mist driven by a storm.

For them, the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved. For uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions of the flesh, men who have barely escaped from those who live in air. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption.

For whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved. 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 overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. 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.

It has happened to them, according to the true proverb, the dog turns back to his own vomit and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire. Chapter 1 of 2 Peter is a very positive and encouraging summons for us to confirm our call and election, according to verse 10, by availing ourselves of divine power for godliness through faith in God's precious and very great promises. Chapter 2, on the other hand, is a very bleak portrayal of these false teachers who have entered the churches and who do not avail themselves of that power, but rather have given themselves over to sexual indulgence and the love of praise and the love of money, as we will see in a few minutes.

The main point of the second chapter is to portray these false teachers and to warn the church against being enticed by them into the resulting condemnation and destruction. The chapter intends to do in a negative way what chapter 1 does in a positive way, namely, make us earnest about the business of confirming our call and election. Last week we looked at verses 1 through 10 of chapter 2 and what we saw there mainly was that the heresy of the false teachers was a moral heresy more so than a doctrinal one.

Instead of submitting to Christ's way of sexual fulfillment, they rather promote and teach sexual license. Instead of submitting to Christ's pattern, they despise authority and resist it, as verse 10 says, and teach, rather, that the meaning of grace is that there are no longer any legitimate regulations on the human body and we may basically follow our passions. The more we rise above the limitations of the law, the more we display the beauty of God's grace.

Therefore, as it were, let us sin that grace may abound. Seems to be the direction they were going. And Peter warns in verse 10 of chapter 2 that God is going to hold such people under punishment until the day of judgment when there will be a decisive punishment.

Heaven and hell are at stake in this chapter, whether we rely on Christ and walk in the way of righteousness in dependence on His power, or whether we deny the Master who bought us through immorality. Eternity is at stake. Now, today I want us to listen to the rest of the chapter, namely verses 11 through 22, and see what lessons there are for us here.

It falls into four sections as I see it, and we'll look at them one at a time. The first section is verse 10, second half of it, to the first half of verse 13, and focus here is on the brazen willfulness and proud self-sufficiency of these false teachers. Then the second unit we'll look at is the second half of verse 13, down to verse 16, and the focus there is on their unashamed indulgence in sex and the love of money.

The third unit is simply verse 17, which I think is intended to expose the emptiness of their teaching. It seems to have promise, but it's found to be empty. And then the last unit will be verses 18 to 22, where Peter warns how if these false teachers entice you away from the way of righteousness, then your latter state will be worse than the former.

So let's look at these four sections and see what the Lord may have for us here at Bethlehem this morning. We'll read, first of all, 10 through 13. Bold and willful, they are not afraid to revile the glorious ones, whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a reviling judgment upon them before the Lord.

But these, that is the false teachers, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct born to be caught and killed, reviling in matters of which they are ignorant, will be destroyed in the same destruction with them, suffering wrong for their wrongdoing. Now, two possible interpretations here. The most common one.

It's very possible that the glorious ones referred to here in verse 10 are the fallen angels described in verse four. And Peter is saying then that the false teachers are so brazen, so cocky, so self-assured that what they are saying is we don't come under any evil influence of supernatural beings. We're free from that.

Freedom is what they promise. So they have a very cocky self-assurance, even against the glories that is the fallen angels whom they revile as if they had no influence upon them. Then to show how great this arrogance is, Peter adds that the angels, and here under this interpretation he would mean the good angels, these good angels, they don't presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon the fallen angels.

Rather, they are humble enough to pass judgment over to God and leave it to him. I have a problem with that interpretation. And the main problem is this.

It seems very unlikely to me that Peter would call the fallen angels glorious ones, or just the glories. Literally, the word is plural, the glories. They revile the glories.

That word was used in 1 Peter 1, verse 11, to refer to all the glories surrounding Christ at his exaltation and second coming. And then if you study the word glory in 2 Peter, you find that it too, in chapter 1, verse 3, and verse 17, and in chapter 3, verse 18, it is associated with Christ in his exalted state and his second coming. And then if you look at 2 Peter 3, verses 3 and 4, what you find these false teachers doing there is scorning the second coming.

They don't believe in it. We're going to talk about that next week. So I'm inclined to think that when Peter says they revile the glories, he means that they mock the glories of God in Christ, especially as they are manifested in his second coming.

And then if that's the case, when it says in verse 11, the angels, and notice it doesn't say the good angels, because I don't think he has in mind any contrast between good or evil angels. He just says the angels, though greater in might and in power, and I think he means greater than the false teachers, do not pronounce a reviling judgment on them. That is the false teachers before the Lord.

So probably what's going on here is that he's saying the false teachers presume in their proud and boastful way to scorn the glories of God that will be manifested at the second coming and to accent their arrogance. He says the holy angels of God, who have every right to point out the evils and the arrogance of the false teachers, let it go and hand judgment over to God. They don't even presume to pronounce a

reviling judgment on the false teachers.

And that accents how unbelievably brazen and self-willed these false teachers are, that they would exalt themselves above the holy angels and do what even they won't presume to do. And then verse 12 adds that the false teachers are like animals. And I think he means in two senses.

One, they are utterly ignorant about what they speak. Picture a wolf at the sunrise howling against the glories of the sunrise, utterly ignorant about the beauties and the glory that are making him howl away. And secondly, they are like animals in that they will be utterly destroyed.

They will come to an ignominious end in judgment. There's an admonition for us here. It's not hard to see.

And the admonition surely is this. Let us beware, people, of spiritual pride. It is so easy once you learn a little bit about God or about his second coming or about freedom to become arrogant and haughty and cocky.

We need to hear the word of Peter about the danger of it and the word of Paul, let him who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. The second unit is chapter 2, 13 to 16. Let's read that.

They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes reveling in their dissipation, carousing with you. They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin.

They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed, accursed children forsaking the way the right way. They have gone astray.

They have followed the way of old Balaam. Numbers 22, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked by his own transgress for his own transgression. A dumb ass spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

The first thing we see here is that the brazenness and willfulness of the false teachers is continued by saying they do in the daytime what most sinners will only do at night. That's the first accent. They even do it in the daytime.

They are so willful. Then that phrase in verse 13 carousing with you literally means eating feasts with you. Now, the picture here seems to be something like this.

There's an all church banquet. The early church had these love feasts, all church banquets that they were having to celebrate the goodness of God. And here come these false teachers like spots and blemishes on these banquets with their eyes bugging out with adultery.

Every woman they laid their eyes on, all they could see was sex and trained in greed. What a phrase. Practiced and trained in greed.

Now, Peter doesn't tell us exactly how they go about making their money. But I think he clues us in by linking these false teachers up with Balaam pretty clearly. You remember Balaam? Balaam was a prophet, not an Israelite prophet in the land of Moab.

Here comes Israel out of the wilderness, wandering up towards Moab. Balak, the king of Moab, is terrified. This is a big people.

They're going to wipe us out. What can we do? Well, we'll get Balaam and pay him the fees of divination to pronounce a curse upon the Israelites. That'll do it.

Balaam jumps at it. And that's what Peter zeros in on here. Balaam says in verse 15, loved the gain from wrongdoing, especially the gain that someone might pay him for fulfilling his prophetic services.

Now, if we just transfer that over to these false teachers, you get a pretty clear idea, I think, what's going on. They go into these love feasts. They allure the unsteady souls and take them away with a promise of freedom.

It says down in verse 19 and not only give them this promise says in verse 18, they entice people who have barely escaped from those who live in error. They take them away and they charge them for their teaching. We all know that if you pay for something, you take it more seriously.

Right. So you charge for your courses in how to understand the Pauline epistles. I think that's basically what they're doing.

In other words, they're going after new converts who are unstable in the faith. Now, the admonition for us here is surely number one. Every one of us should take very personally the need to root ourselves in the word that we not be flimsy and untaught in the doctrines of the faith.

And secondly, we need to take new believers in the church and work hard with them to ground them in the great truths that will make us resistant against the foolishness of false teachers. And third, let's do it with our children. Those are the ones who have the highest priority on our list.

Let's make sure by the time our children get to the point where they can be tempted sexually, they know all about it. And are deeply rooted in God's ways. OK, let's do that at Bethlehem.

And then fourth, here's the other thing. Let's make ourselves a community where we're constantly helping each other send our roots down into the rock of God's truth. Let's just make that an agenda every week to help one another through admonition, through prayer, through encouragement to go deep in the word.

And so build a huge wall that is impervious to false teachers, but welcomes in all the needy in our area. Third section, verse 17. Just one verse.

These are waterless springs and mists driven by the storm. For them, the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved. So picture yourself in the desert.

You are thirsty. You see an oasis, beautiful palm trees, grass. You run, you throw yourself down at the spring and it is dry as a bone.

That's exactly what Peter says these false teachers are like. They hold out such thrills for the new converts. Oh, this life is going to be great with all this freedom.

And they drink it and they die of thirst. We need very much to be a people who are strong in discernment. Discernment between waterless springs and springs of living water.

There are springs of living water in the church. And we need to know the difference. Even if the wolves clothe themselves in sheep's clothing, we've got to be good discerners.

And I think this chapter is written precisely to help us in that. The one bubbles up to eternal life and the other one sinks down into the nether gloom where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. And then the final unit and probably the most important one is verses 18 to 22.

Uttering loud boasts of folly, they entice with licentious passions of the flesh. People who have barely escaped from those who live in error, new converts. In other words, it seems to me they promised them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption.

For whatever overcomes a man to that he is enslaved. For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world through Christ, through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. They are again entangled in them and overpowered.

The last state has become worse for them than the first. 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. It has happened to them according to the true proverb.

The dog turns back to his own vomit and the sow is washed only to wallow in the mire. Notice, first of all, the way that they are enticing the new converts in verse 19. They promised them freedom.

Now, I think it's possible to get a pretty clear idea of what they were saying. I think their argument can be tracked down pretty easily. Let me show you how I go at it.

In first Peter, chapter two, verse 16, listen to these familiar words link up here. Peter said to the churches live as free men. Yet, without using your freedom as a pretext for evil, that's first Peter to 16.

Now, the false teachers, therefore, have a half truth. They're right to focus on Christian freedom. It is central to the New Testament call to faith.

But this is exactly what they were doing, using their freedom as a pretext for evil. And when you do that, you're not really free. You're a slave of corruption, as verse 19 says.

Now, I think there are three meanings that the apostolic call to freedom has. When we are called to freedom by Peter, Paul and Jesus, it means, first of all, that Christ died and rose again to free us from the power and the guilt of sin. Freed from the power of sin.

Secondly, the call to freedom means that we are freed from the law in the sense that we are not enslaved anymore to try to fulfill it, to earn our way to heaven in our own strength. And third, we are freed in the sense that a whole new heart, a new nature is given us by the Holy Spirit so that we freely delight in holiness. And it is not a burden anymore to do what delights the Lord.

As it says in First John, his commandments are not burdensome. But everywhere this good news of freedom is preached, it is distorted and perverted. Second Peter, chapter three, verse 16, gives the program for these false teachers.

Here's what the young converts were paying to hear. It says there that Paul's letters have in them some things hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable. Now, that little word unstable is the same word used back in verse two to describe these new converts who were being enticed.

The ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction. So what the false teachers were doing was taking these unstable souls and teaching them how to use the Pauline epistles to justify their sexual freedom and

immorality. Now, Paul already knew that his books were sitting ducks for these false teachers.

He says in Galatians, chapter five, verse 13, you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love, be servants of one another. Seek the good of one another, not the exploitation for the satisfaction of your own flesh.

But the false teachers were doing just that. They cut the verse in half, twisted the first meaning and said, see, we're called to freedom. And then they use that to justify their love for money, their love for praise, their love for sexual indulgence.

They probably backed up to chapter five, verse one of Galatians and said with great power, picture them in a little seminar with these new believers for freedom. Christ has set us free. Stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to the to the yoke of slavery.

Away with all these enslaving rules to govern the life of the body. Who cares about the body anyway? We are freed in our spirits with Christ. You are not under law.

You are under grace. So convincing. It's so powerful.

It is so twisted. They just completely ignored words like these from Paul. If you live according to the flesh, you will die.

But if by the Holy Spirit within you, you put to death the immoral deeds of the body, you will live. That they jumped over. They skipped over and didn't emphasize that in their seminar at all.

And so Peter blasts the trumpet of warning in these churches so that these new converts and the old ones will wake up and hear that the scriptures are being distorted to their own destruction and that the promised freedom is simply a summons to bondage and destruction. Then in verses 20 and 21, the word of warning zeros right in on these new believers. If you turn away from the holy commandment, if you forsake the way of righteousness, if you deny the master who bought you by your immorality, you are not saved and your condition is worse than it was before you ever knew the way of righteousness.

Peter pictures the real possibility in verse 20 that learning about Jesus Christ can enable a person to make a start in cleaning up his life. The outward appearances of sin are taken away, comes to church, he sings, goes to Sunday school. And then, like Jesus says, the cares and the riches and the pleasures of life choke this new little vine, bears no fruit, it withers and it dies.

And Peter adds, its death is worse than had it never heard the gospel in the first place. Now, let me stress two points from these verses here to try to make the meaning clear and avoid misunderstandings. The first point is this.

There is a principle here, and the principle is the more you know about the way of Christ, the more severe will be your punishment for rejecting it in the end. Isn't that the meaning here in these verses? Better never to have known the way, Peter says in verse 21. And in this, doesn't he simply preserve the teaching of Jesus who said, woe to you, Corazin and Bethsaida, for if the works had been done in you that were done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes long ago.

But it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. Why? More mighty works were done among you. Your judgment will be more severe for you have spurned more revelation.

That's the principle lying behind these verses. The more evidence we have of the reality of Christ, the more severe the judgment for not repenting. As Jesus said in Luke 12, to everyone to whom much is given, much will be required.

Peter warns his converts, then, if you forsake now, now, after you have heard so much, experienced so much, even gotten a start, so it seems, and turn back, it will be worse. Three weeks ago, I went to the doctor here at the MMC office building, and he gave me a prescription for my sore throat. Ten days worth of antibiotics.

And he said to me, he said, don't you stop taking these antibiotics after five days just because that sore throat goes away. He said, if you do, it's going to come back worse, probably. What an illustration of the Christian life.

If we start to doubt and distrust our heavenly physician and we reject his prescription halfway through, our sore throat is going to be worse than it was at the beginning. That's the meaning of verses 20 and 21. And now here's the second point that I want to stress.

Peter is not teaching that God's elect can lose their salvation. He is most definitely teaching that church members can be lost. He is most definitely teaching that those who make an outward profession of faith and sort of clean up the outside of the cup can be lost.

But he is not teaching that God's elect can be lost. And I think verse 22 is an assurance of that in a proverb. Isn't the point of verse 22 that we shouldn't really be surprised if some people make a start in the church and fall away because dogs characteristically go back to their vomit? Pigs, no matter how clean you wash them on the outside, will go back to the mud.

Isn't the point of that if you're still a dog or if you're still a pig? It doesn't really matter how much has been cleaned up. You'll eventually go back. In other words, we shouldn't be surprised that there are bogus professions, bogus sanctification in the church.

And Peter is simply saying here in a graphic way what John said in his first letter, chapter two, verse 19, a text that is threatening and assuring for the elect. He says they went out from us for they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would not have gone out from us. But they went out that it might be plain that they were not all of us.

That text is so crystal clear to say one church members can apostatize and be lost, and two, they weren't really of us. They were not born of God. They were not among the elect.

Jesus put it like this. He who endures to the end will be saved. Matthew 10, 22.

Hebrews puts it like this. We share in Christ only if we hold fast our first confession firm to the end. Paul put it like this.

First Corinthians 15, 1 and 2. I preach to you the gospel which you receive in which you stand by which you are saved if you hold it firm to the end. The whole New Testament, all the witnesses of the New Testament are agreed on this. There is no salvation apart from persevering faith and persevering faith.

We're taught always works itself out in the way of righteousness. And therefore, Peter can say to these people, if you abandon the way of righteousness, you evict yourself from salvation. But that can never

happen.

He teaches to God's elect. If it could, verse 10 in chapter one would make no sense. Look at that verse with me again.

It's the point of the whole letter. I'm coming to think it says, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election. Now, if the elect could be lost, there would be no advantage whatsoever in confirming your election.

Who cares if I'm elect? If the elect are in the same position with all the other people and can be lost just as easily as them. The point of verse 10 is the elect will never fall, but will be granted access into the glorious kingdom of Jesus Christ. And therefore, let us be zealous to confirm that we are among the elect and not a dog or a swine.

Second Peter, chapter two, in conclusion, is written to help us do just that. To confirm our call and election. To help us confirm by warning us not to deny the master who bought us through immorality.

And by strengthening us to resist all the temptations to spiritual arrogance and pride. To resist all the temptations of the love of money and the manifold temptations that come with it. And to resist all the temptations of sexual license that plague us so closely.

It's not the kind of chapter you enjoy reading. It's not the kind I enjoy reading. But those pills I took were so big they weren't any fun to swallow either.

Our physician knows what's good for us. And these words are profitable. We don't spend too much time talking about bleak and ugly things like this.

And I don't spend too much time taking medicine. But when necessary, we take it. And if this chapter does this, increases our earnestness to confirm our calling and our election, it will have succeeded and we will be oaks of righteousness rather than dandelions which get blown away in the wind of the spring.

And I pray that God will make it so. Shall we pray? Almighty God, I want so much for you to use the word to strengthen this people. Convict those, Lord, who are on the brink of repentance and bring them into the fold.

Let no one leave today, Father, please, without having laid themselves down in the lap of the Lord who bought them by his precious blood. Bring them into the family, root them in the faith. And then for all those who know you already, please, Father, give us resistance against any false teaching.

Help us not to be cocky in the faith. Help us not to love money. Help us not to love illicit sex.

Help us to love the precious and very great promises. We love you, Father. We want to be dismissed with your benediction.

Shall we stand for that benediction? May the God of all hope fill you with joy and peace in believing, in order that by the power of the Holy Spirit you might abound in hope. Amen. We invite you to visit Desiring God online at [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org). There you'll find hundreds of sermons, articles, radio broadcasts and much more, all available to you at no charge.

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