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MINISTRIES

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Confirm Your Calling: The Error of Lawless People (2 Peter 3:14-18)

Welcome to the final teaching in our verse-by-verse study through 2 Peter. In this teaching, we will be going through 2 Peter 3:14-18, which is the closing section of the epistle. This section mainly consists of Peter’s warning about lawless people who misinterpret Paul’s letters. After we examine this text, we will conclude this series by giving a summary of the main ideas we’ve learned in our study of this epistle. Let’s get started.

In the previous teaching, we saw that Peter refuted the objections of the scoffers who denied the Messiah’s Second Coming. He critiqued the logic of their objections and assured his readers that the day of the Lord will come, the wicked will be judged, and a new heavens and new earth will be established. Now, Peter proceeds to instruct his readers on how they should live as they wait for the fulfillment of these events:

2 Peter 3:14

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.

Peter says that since his readers are “[waiting for these](#)”—that is, waiting for God to judge the wicked and bring a new heavens and a new earth—“[therefore](#)” they should “[be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace](#).” Being found by God “[without spot of blemish](#)” echoes what Peter wrote just a few verses earlier. In verse 14, Peter urged his readers to lead lives characterized by “[holiness and godliness](#).” As we discussed last time, this admonition to pursue holiness is reminiscent of what Peter wrote in his first letter:

1 Peter 1:13-16

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ [Messiah Yeshua]. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, **you also be holy in all your conduct**, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

In this passage, Peter cites the Torah as the standard for holiness. He said, “[since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’](#)” This quotation comes from the book of Leviticus in the context of various laws regarding how God’s people are to live (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; 20:7, 26). So, Peter’s concept of holiness is based on how the Torah defines holiness. As they wait for the Second Coming, Peter is essentially urging his readers to live according to the Torah so that they can “[be found by him without spot or blemish.](#)” Sadly, many people today claim that the Torah is irrelevant to Christians, but this exhortation from Peter contradicts what we would expect if that were indeed the case. From Peter’s perspective, as we wait for the Second Coming, God’s people are to be leading holy lives according to the Torah.

This context is important as we continue to the following few verses. Peter goes on to warn his readers about people who twist Paul’s letters to promote a lawless message. But before we get there, Peter cites Paul in support of the message *he* has been teaching:

2 Peter 3:15-16a

[And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.](#)

So, Peter says that Paul wrote about the same topics that Peter has been teaching his readers about. He says that Paul “[also wrote](#)” to his readers and that Paul’s letters speak “[of these matters.](#)” “[These matters](#)” refer to the two things Peter just mentioned: the call for God’s people to pursue holiness and the patience of the Lord (Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, NAC (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 396).

So, according to Peter, Paul, in his own letters, also taught that believers should be holy as they wait for the Second Coming. There are many examples in Paul’s letters where he instructs his readers to be holy (e.g., Romans 12:1; Ephesians 1:4; Colossians 1:22; 3:12; Titus 1:8). For instance, in a passage reminiscent of Peter’s exhortation to “[be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish,](#)” Paul writes this in Ephesians:

Ephesians 5:25-27

[Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, **that he might sanctify her**, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, **without spot or wrinkle** or any such thing, **that she might be holy and without blemish.**](#)

We want to emphasize that Peter agrees with Paul’s letters. He calls Paul a “[beloved brother](#)” who has “[wisdom.](#)” Peter and Paul completely agree that believers should be holy. This is important because Peter goes on to say Paul’s letters contain things that “[are hard to understand](#)” and that “[ignorant and unstable](#)” people “[twist](#)” Paul’s letters. He then connects this twisting of Paul’s letters with “[the error of lawless people.](#)” In other words, Peter and Paul agree that God’s people should be holy, but some people are misusing Paul’s letters to say something else. Here is what Peter writes:

2 Peter 3:16b-17

[There are some things in them \[that is, Paul’s letters\] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.](#)

So, according to Peter, Paul's letters contain content that is "hard to understand." In Greek, the word translated as "hard to understand" is δυσνόητος, which is often applied to texts that are difficult to interpret, hence "hard to understand" (Richard Bauckham, *Jude-2 Peter*, WBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 331).

However, some interpreters suggest that Peter is not trying to say that Paul himself is unclear or confusing. Rather, in this context, Peter's point seems to be that Paul's letters are susceptible to misinterpretation when people approach them with bad motives. Such people *intentionally* misinterpret Paul's letters to serve their own agenda. Hence, Peter goes on to say that "the ignorant and unstable twist" Paul's letters. According to Richard Bauckham, these descriptions carry a sense of condemnation:

[T]hese people are ignorant because they are *unwilling* to learn, and unstable because they *allow themselves* to be misled.

—Richard Bauckham, *Jude-2 Peter*, WBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 331

In the broader context, Peter is specifically referring to the false teachers he has been condemning throughout the epistle. *Those* are the "ignorant and unstable" people who have been twisting Paul's letters and the other Scriptures. That makes sense considering that Peter had just spent much of his letter condemning these false teachers and warning his readers not to be misled by them. As Douglas Moo writes:

What Peter suggests, then, is that these false teachers are 'twisting' Paul's own writings as support for their heresies.

—Douglas Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 212

This raises the question: what heresies are these false teachers promoting? As we've been discussing throughout this series, there are two main heresies that Peter has been confronting in his epistle. One is rejecting the doctrine that the Messiah would return and bring judgment (2 Peter 1:16; 3:3-4). The false teachers claim that the Messiah's return is just a "cleverly devised myth." They ridicule the notion of coming judgment.

This first heresy leads to the second: antinomianism (2 Peter 2:2, 7-10, 14, 18:22). The word antinomian literally means "against law." The heresy of antinomianism teaches that Christians are not required to obey the Law of Moses, the Torah ("Antinomianism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, britannica.com/topic/antinomianism).

The false teachers taught that since the Messiah's return is just a myth, why not abandon all moral boundaries and indulge the desires of the flesh? As we've seen throughout this series, the false teachers in 2 Peter explicitly reject the "way of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:21). The "way of righteousness" is a phrase taken from the Old Testament that characterizes living in obedience to the Torah (e.g., Psalm 1). According to Peter, these false teachers are sexually immoral, blasphemous, greedy liars (2 Peter 2:1ff). They intentionally target vulnerable believers to get them to abandon the way of righteousness, promising "freedom" but ultimately leading people into slavery (2 Peter 2:19).

And now we learn that these false teachers were apparently twisting Paul's letters *to support their heresies*! How exactly did they twist Paul's letters? According to Richard Bauckham, most commentators believe that these false teachers were misrepresenting Paul's teachings on the law and

referencing passages from his letters in a manner that he did not intend. (Richard Bauckham, *Jude-2 Peter*, WBC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 332; See also, Douglas Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 212; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, NAC (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 397).

In other words, they appealed to Paul's letters to justify their lawless doctrine, thereby twisting Paul's teachings regarding the law. It should be noted that Paul himself condemns this "slanderous" misrepresentation of his teachings:

Romans 3:8

And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

As Bruce Longenecker and Todd Still write regarding Romans 3:8:

Evidently Paul's gospel was being misrepresented as promoting what might be called an immoral 'libertinism'—living without any kind of restraint.

—Bruce W. Longenecker and Todd D. Still, *Thinking Through Paul: A Survey of His Life, Letters, and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 183

The false teachers in 2 Peter were promoting the idea that one should live without any moral restraint because the Messiah will not be returning anyway. They were promoting lawlessness. Both Peter and Paul say that this is a complete twisting of Paul's teachings. Peter calls this heresy "*the error of lawless people*," and he warns his readers not to be led astray by this error:

2 Peter 2:17

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.

The term "lawless people" (ἄθεσμων) is used only one other time in the Bible. It is used earlier in 2 Peter to describe the "wicked" Sodomites (2 Peter 2:7). We also find this word used in other Greek writings to describe those who reject the law of Moses. Philo uses this term to describe the "law-breakers" (ἄθεσμων) who transgress the Torah. After describing the blessings for obedience outlined in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, Philo says this:

These are the blessings invoked upon good men, men who fulfil the laws by their deeds, which blessings will be accomplished by the gift of the bounteous God, who glorifies and rewards moral excellence because of its likeness to Himself. We must now investigate the curses delivered against the **law-breakers** [ἄθεσμων] and transgressors.

—Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments* 126 (Translated by F. H. Colson)

After this, Philo goes on to describe the punishments stipulated in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 for those who transgress God's laws.

So, Peter uses the same term that another Greek writer uses to describe people who disregard the law of Moses. And it's not a stretch to think that Peter's use of this term carries the same connotation. After all, just a few verses earlier, Peter exhorts his readers to lead lives characterized by "*holiness and godliness*"

(2 Peter 2:11), and he elsewhere explicitly appeals to the Torah in support of this exhortation (1 Peter 1:15-16). Also, as we discussed earlier in this teaching, Peter says these false teachers have rejected the “way of righteousness,” which is another way of saying that they reject the Torah as the way to live. Finally, Peter says that these false teachers twist not only Paul’s letters but also “[the other Scriptures](#).” The word “Scripture” (γραφῆ) is used fifty times in the New Testament, and every other time it is used, it always refers to the Hebrew Scriptures or “Old Testament.” So, Peter’s reference to “the other Scriptures” indicates that he considers the Old Testament, including the Torah, to be authoritative. The fact that he places Paul’s letters within the same category as the Old Testament implies that Paul’s letters *are in agreement* with the Old Testament.

Thus, twisting Paul’s letters is “[the error of lawless people](#)”—it is the error of those who reject the Torah. Peter’s warning against being led astray by this error serves as a strong admonition not to interpret Paul’s letters as teaching antinomianism. According to Peter, such an interpretation distorts Paul’s words and leads to destruction.

Let’s continue:

2 Peter 3:18

[But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ \[Messiah Yeshua\]. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.](#)

Instead of being led astray by the error of lawless people, Peter encourages his readers to “[grow in the grace and knowledge](#)” of the Messiah, Yeshua. The themes of grace and knowledge frame Peter’s epistle. Peter started his letter by wishing that “grace” and peace would be multiplied in the lives of his readers “[in the knowledge of God and of Jesus \[Yeshua\] our Lord](#)” (1 Peter 1:2). Growing in grace and knowledge of the Messiah is how believers become mature in the faith (1 Peter 1:3-11) and avoid the errors of false teachers.

Peter ends with a doxology directed toward Yeshua. The word doxology literally means “word of glory,” and it is a liturgical expression of praise. Peter writes, “[To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.](#)” The day of eternity refers to the age to come, the time when the Messiah will establish his eternal kingdom. Peter concludes his letter by reminding his readers once again that the day of eternity will come indeed. May we walk in holiness as we await the arrival of this great day.

Conclusion

And that is the book of 2 Peter! Here’s a summary of the main ideas that we’ve covered in this teaching series.

1. In this epistle, Peter emphasizes the importance of growing spiritually, embracing biblical doctrine, and resisting those who teach false doctrine. Growing in our knowledge of God is part of how we confirm our calling and election. Peter also teaches that our good character will be the proof that we are genuine followers of the Messiah.
2. According to Peter, God has already given us everything we need to grow spiritually. Namely, he has given us his promise of salvation, and he has given us the Scriptures, which teach us about God’s character and will for our lives. (2 Peter 1:3-15)
3. Despite the claims of scoffers, the Messiah is coming back. Peter supports this truth by

referencing his own eyewitness experience. Peter saw Yeshua's glory and majesty with his own eyes during the transfiguration event. Peter also appeals to biblical prophecy as testifying of the Messiah's return. He assures his readers that the words of Scripture are the very words of God and, therefore, a reliable testimony to the truth. (2 Peter 1:16-21)

4. Peter warns about false teachers who bring in destructive heresies, which include rejecting the reality of the Messiah's return and promoting a lawless lifestyle. Peter assures his readers that God will indeed punish the wicked. Their lawlessness will lead to destruction. He also assures them that God will rescue the righteous. (2 Peter 2:1-22)
5. While it might seem to be taking longer than expected or hoped for, the day of the Lord will come. All evil will be destroyed, along with the entire present creation. God will establish new heavens and new earth. In the meantime, we must lead lives characterized by holiness and godliness. And even though false teachers have twisted his words, Paul agrees. (2 Peter 3:1-18)

Ultimately, Peter wanted his readers to hold fast to the hope that Messiah is coming back. He said not to let anyone's false and twisted teaching remove that hope from you. Since you do have hope in his return, he further said not to let anyone dissuade you from obeying God and being holy. We know the Messiah is coming to judge the world, and we know what he wants us to do while we wait for his return. Let's act on what we know.

We hope this verse-by-verse teaching series through 2 Peter has blessed you. As Peter would say, may you continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Yeshua the Messiah!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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