March 10/11, 2018

Empty Promises

Hope Filled Living in a Culture of Despair

2 Peter 2:17-22

Pastor Bryan Clark

Right out of high school I moved to Chicago and lived there three years to go to school. There were a lot of things about Chicago that I fell in love with. One of those would be the pizza. *(laughter)* Chicago is known for its pizza, and for good reason! I graduated there, came back, went to the university; Patty and I got married, and we headed out to Southern California for me to go to grad school. While we were there, we became aware of a pizza restaurant down by the beach that was called *Chicago Pizza*. As a matter of fact their big advertisement was *Chicago-style pizza*, so this sounded really appealing. I actually had a friend of mine that was in the dorm with me in Chicago who had gotten married and also lived in Southern California, so we decided to go together. We show up and order our Chicago pizza. They bring out what looks like a cracker—no tomato sauce, sliced up tomatoes, and a little parmesan cheese. *(laughter)* Exactly! I felt obligated to inform the waitress, "This is not Chicago pizza." It's like, "What is this? Is this the appetizer? Is this the teaser?" I'm sorry but only in California could they think that's a Chicago pizza. (No offense to those of you from the great state of California.) *(laughter)*

You know, to be promised one thing and have something else delivered, when it's a pizza is just kind of annoying. But to be promised something with the most significant decisions of life, only to have those promises be lies and deception, that is something very different. That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 2 Peter, Chapter 2. Peter is concerned about the false teachers that have come into the churches and have the potential to lead the people astray. Last week I talked about a false teacher being like a life coach. These are all people that are applying for the opportunity to tell you how to live life. There are hundreds of such voices coming at us every day, and so Peter is encouraging us: Before you listen to the words of this life coach, it might be helpful to look at the life of the life coach and ask yourself, "Is that person living the life that I want for myself?" If not, why would you listen to what they have to say? So he talked about the attitudes and the characteristics of these false teachers, and we continue with that in verse 17:

These are springs without water and mists driven by a storm... (*NASB, 2 Peter 2:17a)

So if you think about the path of life as a road—last week in verse 16 we were reminded even a dumb donkey knows that we should not forsake the path of life—so this morning think of Highway 2 as the path of life. Think of it from here down to Nebraska City. And then imagine all these off ramps, all these billboards, all these signs, all these appeals to get off the road—to take one of these ramps in order to experience "more," in order to experience what you are "looking for". The promise is: "...for that which will ultimately satisfy".

So what they are promising are springs full of clean, fresh water. Now these images were very powerful in a 1st century Near East culture. They are not as powerful for us. We have water in America at our disposal everywhere you look, but think about an ancient culture where it was dry; it was hot; it was barren, and water was about daily survival. Imagine traveling somewhere with the understanding if you did not find springs along the way, there was a real chance you may not survive. So imagine someone who is traveling, getting more and more thirsty and realizing, "This is getting desperate. If I cannot find water, I might not survive." Imagine a whole family and they

encounter someone who says, "You know, if you go about five miles off the path, I promise there is a spring full of cool fresh water." So you get off the path and you travel down that path, believing that you were told the truth. But you get there and you find out it is a spring with no water. It's now dried up, and you realize you and your family will perish. That is how Peter is describing these false teachers. They are **springs without water.** They are **mists driven by a storm.**

We in the Midwest might think of it more as being in the midst of severe drought where the clouds form, and there is a moment where you think, "Maybe...finally there is some relief from the drought," but the clouds quickly dissipate. No rain! and we are disappointed again. Now you contrast that with how many times Jesus in the Gospels identified Himself as the *Water of Life*. For those with dry and thirsty souls, Jesus identified Himself as *the water that satisfies a thirsty soul*. What these false teachers are doing is so cruel; it is so sinister that the verse ends:

> **...for whom the black darkness has been reserved.** (Vs. 17b)

In other words, their judgment ultimately is in hell because of the sinister lies and deception that have destroyed so many lives. Very strong language! What did they do? Verse 18:

> **For speaking out arrogant** [inflated, exaggerated] ***words*** **of vanity** [They are empty... worthless.] **they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality...** (Vs. 18a)

We saw this word **entice** last week. It's a Greek word that means to bait a hook or to bait a trap. So, they are trying to trap you. They are trying to lure you off the path of life with all kinds of empty promises, with all kinds of billboards and advertisements and promises that this will make you happy. "This will satisfy and give you what you are looking for!" So, what exactly do they use as bait on the trap? The text tells us. They tap into these **fleshly desires.** The best way to understand this is to realize we are people made in the image of God, and as such, we have legitimate longings and desires. We legitimately long to be loved, to be accepted, to belong. We long for safety, for security, for pleasure, for significance, for hope. These are real and legitimate longings. The false teachers understand that so that's what they tap into. They tap into something that, for you, is real, and it's powerful, and you are seeking, and struggling, and looking, but they are **springs without water.** They lie to you and convince you that there is something that will satisfy, when at the end of the story, it will only break your heart. They **entice**; they bait the trap with things that are real and meaningful and powerful to you.

> **...by sensuality those who barely escape from the ones who live in error,** (Vs. 18b)

It's kind of a weird statement, but basically what it is saying is at one time these were people who were neck deep in their pagan ways, but it was so hurtful, so empty, so lonely, so dissatisfying that they are now seeking something different...for something more.

So imagine three categories of people: There are those who have experienced life change in Jesus. They are traveling the path of life and they are absolutely determined, "This is the path I want to travel." And then there are people that are neck-deep in their pagan ways. They could care less what God has to say. They could care less what the Bible has to say. They could care less what someone like me has to say. And then there are these people in the middle, who have been so hurt by the ways of the world. They are searching, are seeking, are desperately wondering if there is something that will finally satisfy? They could be new believers. They could be just seekers, but they are in that high risk category!

You remember in chapter one Peter told us there are these steps up the staircase that are necessary to grow and strengthen as a Christian. It started with *moral excellence,* which was this idea of ultimately deciding, "Yes, this is the path I want to travel. I've made up my mind." Second was *knowledge*—the idea that we need to know the truth. We are extremely vulnerable to the false teachers until we have a strong sense of what is true. You will never really understand the lies until you know the truth. Once we know the truth, then it leads to a *self-discipline,* which leads to *perseverance,* which leads to *godliness,* and Peter kind of stepped us through the process. So Peter is identifying this as the group that is at risk; this is the group that the false teachers are targeting. They don't yet know the truth. They are either new believers or they are seeking, and they are trying to find that which will ultimately satisfy. Verse 19, what do they promise them?

...promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; (Vs. 19a)

They are slaves of their own choices. They are slaves of their own lifestyle, but what they promise people is freedom. This roots all the way back to Genesis chapter 3. This is what the serpent offered Adam and Eve—that ultimately life would be better if you were in charge, if you were God, if you were deciding what is right and wrong. That's ultimate freedom, and it sounds so compelling. So, we are traveling down Highway 2, which is the path of life, but we notice, "You know this is really restrictive. I mean there is a speed limit. There are lines. You are supposed to go only one way. There are all these signs that are telling us what to do." And then we look out beyond the highway and there are all these empty fields. "I don't see any signs, any lines, or any speed limits out there. That looks like freedom!" So, we decide that's the way of freedom.

You know what's going to happen. You are only going to get so far until you get stuck. The farther you get away from Highway 2—from the off ramp that seemed so compelling—the more you see that everyone is stuck in the mud, living in bondage. That dirty little secret was just far enough away you couldn't really see it when you took the off ramp. Now some of you in the room, you are wired up with four-wheel-drive. *(laughter)* Now, I have a four-wheel-drive vehicle. I really like it, but here is what I learned. When you get a four-wheel-drive vehicle stuck, you are really stuck, and it is way more work getting you unstuck. Some of you in the room, you are four-wheel-drive people. You are off the path of life. You are determined to take your own path. It is getting worse and worse and worse and yet you are determined in your four-wheel-drive attitude not to admit that you are getting stuck, and you are going to get so deep in the mud it's going to become very difficult to rescue you. It is not freedom! Even the false teachers themselves live in bondage. The end of the verse says:

...for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. (Vs. 19b)

That's actually what was referred to as a military proverb. The literal idea was that when the enemy defeats you, overcomes you, then you become the enemy's slave. Peter is using it more metaphorically to say, "When you give in to the false teachers, you ultimately are overcome by those decisions, and you become enslaved to that which you thought would make you so happy."

Starting then in verse 20 to the end of the chapter is a very highly disputed portion of 2 Peter. There is a wide range of opinion. There are lots of variables. I don't really want to go into all of those other than just to let you know there are lots of opinions. It's hard to be too dogmatic about the interpretation. One of the reasons that's helpful to understand is there are those who would teach you that you can lose your salvation, and one of the passages they go to is this section of 2 Peter. What I would suggest to you is none of us should formulate our deepest theological views around a passage that is so uncertain in the interpretation. It's kind of like Hebrews 6. It's confusing—lots of

opinions—but no one should go to this passage and say, "There! That proves it!" This passage doesn't prove anything; there is just too much uncertainty! So with that said, I'm going to tell you what I think it says, but just be aware there are others that think differently. Verse 20:

> **For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them.** (Vs. 20-21)

So, the first part of the debate is: who are the **they** that's referred to in verse 20? There are a few that say that **they** refers to those who are in between the pagan world and the road of life—those seekers or maybe those new believers—so the people of verse 18. But very few commentators hold that view because it is very difficult to support. Almost all commentators think the **they** are the false teachers. Grammatically, that makes the most sense; it connects to verse 19. Also, the false teachers are the subject of the discussion through the whole chapter, so most likely the **they** is referring to the false teachers.

Much more of the debate and the discussion is around the idea of whether or not the false teachers were believers. Were they believers that lost their salvation? Were they believers that gave up their salvation willingly, or were they never believers at all? That's what most of the discussion revolves around. This is, to me, very similar to the text in Hebrews 6 if you are familiar with that. It has a lot of the same dynamics. I think what the text is talking about is that these false teachers came out of their pagan ways to explore this new movement called Christianity. In the process they learned knowledge. We talked about Peter using this word "*know*" a lot in 2 Peter. It could mean to *know experientially*. It could mean to *know the information*. Basically what he is saying is these people came out of those pagan ways and they learned the information related to the claim that Jesus was God in the flesh. He was the Lord Jesus Christ and He provided the way of righteousness. But at the end of the day they listened, they involved themselves with the people; they gave consideration to it but ultimately decided, "I don't want it!" They decided it was too restrictive. They decided they wanted to indulge their flesh. They decided they did not want to be told what to do—they despised authority—and ultimately they decided, "I am not interested," and went back, entangled in their former ways. Peter says that's now worse than their previous situation. Why does he say that?

Peter taught us in 1 Peter that all of us, before we came to Christ, were ignorant and searching for that which would ultimately satisfy. We are trying to figure out, "Which is the road of life, and how do I know it, and where is it?" But once we encounter the resurrected Christ and our lives have been changed, Peter told us we are not ignorant anymore. At one time we lived that way because we didn't know any better. Now we know better, so it would be foolish to return to those former ways. That's what Peter taught us in his first letter. So, the reason in this text that these false teachers are now worse off than they were before is because now they have been exposed to the truth of the gospel. They have been exposed to the truth of who Jesus is, what He did, and the way of salvation. They have actually been shown that this is the path of life, but after their analysis, after careful consideration—it may be weeks or months or years—they finally decided they're not interested. "I don't want it," and they go back to their pagan ways. At this point they understand the gospel; they are not missing any information. They just don't want it, and that puts them in a worse situation than they were before.

Now, this really should not be difficult to understand in the sense that it is talked about a lot in the New Testament. Jesus Himself talked about the parable of the soils and what happens to the seed.

Some seem like the seed takes root, but not really. Jesus talked about the tares and the wheat. Sometimes the tares get mixed up with the wheat, and He actually said, "Don't you try to pull up the tares because, in doing so, you might accidentally pull up some of the wheat." Jesus in essence said, "Only God can ultimately tell what is going on in the human heart." Other passages like James talks about faith and works, and a faith that saves is a faith that works. John talks about those who claim to be Christians but their sin as a way of life should really make us wonder if anything has really happened that has transformed their soul? So, there are a lot of these discussions about people who can enter into the subculture of Christianity. They can get really religious—they can take it out for a test drive—and can try to figure out if this is good and what they are looking for, but at some point decide, "I don't think I'm interested," and as a result of that, they walk away. It could be weeks, could be months, could be years. The last verse, verse 22, then confirms this conclusion:

> **It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, *returns* to wallowing in the mire."**

In other words, the false teachers returned to their former ways because that is their nature. Having never experienced new life in Christ, having never become partakers of the divine nature, still in their sinful nature that ultimately wins out, that's who they are, and they go back to their former ways. One is a proverb from the Book of Proverbs. One is a proverb from ancient times. But simply stated: you can take a pig out of the mud and you can shower him up and put cologne on him, but the pig is still a pig, and the pig will go back and wallow in the mud. Why? Because the pig is still a pig! That is its nature. That is basically the essence of verse 22.

So all of this raises the question in 2 Peter chapter 2: what is the point? "Is there a warning to the false teachers?" "Yes, I would certainly say that is true." The challenge is: typically the false teachers are not here this morning, and the false teachers really do not want to listen to what Peter says or anything that I might say. The primary message is to us as believers—in understanding the risk—that false teachers are real! They are powerful...compelling...convincing, and they are very good at leading people astray! They find things in your life that are real, that are powerful, that are legitimate longings and desires. They tap into your pain, your disappointments, and your struggles. They offer you empty promises. They offer you exaggerated statements. They offer you **springs without water**. They are so cruel that they'll actually say, "It looks like you and your family are dying of thirst. If you take this path, I promise you there is a spring full of cool, fresh water," even though they know that is not true. How do they know it is not true? Because they themselves are living in bondage; they themselves have become enslaved to their own corruption. If they are going down, they are going to take as many down with them as possible.

So, here are some things to think about. First of all, if you have trusted Christ as Savior, this is the first step in the process from chapter 1 that you are going to *decide*: "This is my path. This is the path I want to travel. This is where I believe I am going to find life." Then you commit to that the next step: *knowledge*. You are extremely vulnerable to the false teachers until you really understand what is true so you can stand on that truth, which then leads to *self-control*, which then leads to *perseverance*, which leads to *godliness*, which was that process that we talked about in chapter 1.

One of the great first steps down that path, if you have never taken this step, would be baptism. Baptism is publicly identifying oneself as a follower of Jesus. I mentioned this a couple of weeks ago. We have a baptism service coming up the weekend of April 14th and 15th, two weeks after Easter. It is a great opportunity to follow through on that commitment and say, "You know, this is the path I choose; I'm in." If you are interested, you can call the church office; you can ask someone at the information center. If you still have questions, two weeks from today there is a baptism class.

You can get information about it on the website that should be able to answer your questions or certainly you can talk to one of the pastoral staff, or maybe even a Christian friend that you would be comfortable with.

Beyond that, in a crowd this size we would have to assume that there may be many who have been deceived by the false teachers. I want to remind you again—they are compelling! They are really good at what they do. They are very convincing. They tap into things in your life that are real and powerful, and they are really, really good and effective at leading people astray. They promise water to a thirsty soul; they promise freedom. They promise that this is what you are looking for.

One of the first steps to traveling down the path of life is to be willing to be honest—just be willing to be honest. How is it going right now? Just to be honest with yourself. I am not asking to who you pretend to be on social media. I'm not asking about the mask you put on and wear when you come to church. I'm not asking about all the ways you pretend with your friends that everything is okay. I'm not asking that. I'm asking you to be honest, like at 12:00 at night, when you're all alone and can't sleep, and you are disappointed. You are hurt or sad or fearful, and you are angry, and in those moments you are very disappointed with life. You never quite thought it would be like this, and you have lost your way. I want you to know there is nobody here that wants to put you down. There is nobody here waiting to give you a lecture. There is nobody wanting to wag a finger and say, "I told you so!" There is nobody that is wanting to heap on shame and guilt. It is just the opposite really—just people that want to help! But the first step is yours, and you have to be honest. Is this the way you thought it was going to be? Are you happy? Are you satisfied? Is this really the path you want to travel?

Some of you, you are so disappointed you have turned to drugs and alcohol. That's your way of escaping. You have convinced yourself and the people around you that you've got it handled, but you don't have it handled. It's starting to take over and you know it, and it is getting out of control. It's affecting you. It's affecting your job. It is affecting your relationships, and you are starting to realize, "This is out of control!" How far down that path do you have to go before you are willing to be honest enough to say, "This isn't the way I want to live"?

For some of you, you have turned to pornography. Maybe it started out as a curiosity—no harm, no foul. What's the big deal? Then a little bit more, then a little bit more. Now for you it has become your place of refuge. It's your drug of choice. It's where you go to escape because life has gotten too painful, but now you are starting to realize, "I'm not sure I can stop." Every time you do it you feel the shame; you feel the guilt. You feel dirty, and you tell yourself, "I will never do it again!" But now you can't stop. Now, for you, life is about cover-up. It is about deceit and lies. Now you live every day in bondage. You wonder if you will ever live another day where you are free again. You look in the mirror and wonder, "How did I get here?"

For some of you, it is this drive for money. It's this drive for stuff. It is this drive for significance. You desperately want to be somebody, maybe to impress someone who frankly doesn't care. It is about money. It is about cars. It is about power. It is about position. You are going a hundred miles an hour because somebody convinced you, "That's where it's at. That will make you happy. That will satisfy you," yet in the middle of the night, you are not happy. You are not satisfied. You are not at rest. As a matter of fact everything is kind of unraveling, falling apart, and you may lose everything! At what point are you honest and say, "Hey, this isn't working. This isn't what I thought it was going to be. This isn't making me happy. This isn't the path of life!"

We have resources here to help with every single thing that I've named. There is a way back to the path of life; I promise you that. But the first step has to be yours, and the first step is to admit, "Maybe I've lost my way." Hey, the false teachers are good. They are convincing. They are compelling. But at some point you have to admit they lied to me, and I'm ready to get back on the path of life. You say, "Is there any hope for me?" Don't ever forget the words of Jesus, "*You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free."*

Our Father, we are sobered this morning by the reality that the false teachers are out there and they are really, really good at what they do. There are people here this morning whose lives has been disrupted and some devastated because they have believed the empty promises of the false teachers. God, search our hearts. May we have the courage this morning to be honest. Maybe this morning is the first step in turning back to find the path of life that is only found in Jesus. Lord, that is my prayer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

(Life Story Video):

I remember being in elementary school; I was about 8. Mom informed us that we were going to a funeral. Well, finally, "Who died?" "Well, actually it is your father." I'm like, "Daddy is in the other room." We just didn't think about it that we had three sets of grandparents. It's all we knew. It started jumbling up some ideas about identity. My father was flying in Vietnam, and he was shot down and reported missing in action. I've always said I have my father and my dad. He was also in the Air Force. Eventually those assignments ended with me in my second high school, and we were oversees in West Germany.

I discovered a youth group. It was a place to hang out, and I found a place I belonged. The most exciting part of it was I realized that God is real. I bumped into a real Jesus—got to know Him, fall in love with Him; I invited Him into my life. I came back to the United States, had to go to college—and left Jesus in Germany.

Life got really crazy out of control. I remember finally meeting a guy. Within a year we were married. It was a whole new culture—all new rules, and it was always adjusting and fitting into the environment around me. "What are the rules here? What am I supposed to do? What rituals am I suppose to follow?" I can remember going crazy. I would get frustrated because my husband wanted to know where his supper was, not where his wife was. So, I took that as a license to let go even more.

After the marriage ended, seeking relationships, finding a guy in a bar—well, it was serial monogamy so that's okay. The messages were always out there calling me, inviting me. "It's party! Come have a party! Let's all party together!" That was the message—that life could be better if we all would go hang out at the party. I literally heard people saying that they could hide out from everything else. It's really easy to fit in there. It's real easy to get approval. Got what I wanted, and I hated it.

I had met a friend in high school that was part of that youth group with me. I've got to say it's got to be God that has kept her part of my life. She said that she met someone who was so excited about their church. She said, "Let's go check it out." I found myself sitting in a step-study group for Celebrate Recovery. It's a Christ centered 12-step program. I walked in to Lincoln Berean on the 30th of December, 2016. I was going to start the New Year. I met Terri that night, and in that step-study over the year, I was given time and space just to

be me. I wasn't criticized. I wasn't judged. I was still looking for, "What are the rules that I'm suppose to follow and how am I supposed to do this?" It didn't matter. What I found there was a place to be safe, where it was okay not to be okay. It's why it is so nice having Terri sitting across from me because when I came here and met you and was given space to come back, I was reminded that day that I'd had the answer for quite some time. When I had invited Christ to come and live and be in and do life with me, He never left. Jesus meets me where I am. I'm not unforgiven. When I can stay connected with the friends who help remind me of that message, life is getting a lot better.

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March 10/11, 2018

Empty Promises

Hope-filled Living in a Culture of Despair

2 Peter 2:17-22

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Can you think of times when you were promised something that turned out to be something far different than what you were promised? Share your story.

2. One big challenge we have today is that false teachers can easily pretend to be something they are not. They appear as celebrities or experts, they write books, have blogs or are on social media yet most never really see how they live their lives. What might be some examples of this?

Bible Study

1. Read II Peter 2:17-19. Peter describes the false teachers as springs without water or mists driven by a storm. What would be examples of this in our culture today? What are the promises the false teachers are making today? Compare Jesus' words in John 4:13,14 and 7:37,38.

2. How does the strategy of the false teachers resemble the strategy of the Serpent in Genesis 3:1-6? What is the "bait" that both the false teachers and the Serpent put in the trap to capture prey?

3. Where is true freedom found and why? Is doing your own thing or indulging the flesh really freedom? Why or why not?

4. Read II Peter 2:20-22. The false teachers are most likely the "they" described in these verses. This is most consistent with both the grammar and the focus of the chapter. What is Peter saying about them? Were these false teachers ever saved according to the text? See also Jude 19 as well as II Peter 2:1.

5. Can someone appear to be a "Christian" yet not experience true conversion? What is the difference between knowing the truth and believing the truth? Compare Matthew 13:24-30; James 2:14-26; Acts 20:28-30.

6. According to Peter in 2:22 the false teachers are simply returning to their true nature by going back to the sin that previously entangled them. How does the illustration of the dog and sow support this idea?

Application

1. The false teachers are very clever and compelling. They make their message very appealing to those who are searching for answers. Yet, they are Springs without water who promise one thing and deliver another. At some point we all need to be honest about the path we are traveling and whether or not it is what we had hoped it would be. How would you assess the path you are on today? Is it possible you were fooled by the false teachers and your path has not been what you thought it would be?

2. Step one to making necessary changes is to admit what's really true in your life today. If you were to take off the mask and just be real, what would we see?

3. What would be a practical step you could take to get back on the right path?