

## **DON'T LISTEN TO THEM** **A Sermon on 2 Peter 1:3-15**

**by Russell Smith**

I love the story about the atheistic philosophy professor. One day in class he asked, "Has anyone seen God?" The students all shook their heads no. "Has anyone touched God?" The students shook their heads. "Is there any direct evidence that God exists?" They shook their heads. "Therefore, God must not exist." Then one of the students replied, "Has anyone seen the professor's brain? Has anyone touched the professor's brain? Is there any direct evidence that the professor's brain exists? Therefore, the professor's brain must not exist."

I don't know if that story is true, but it ought to be. The student in that story had to answer his professor's sloppy thinking. The apostle Peter also had to answer some sloppy thinking in the early church. There were teachers going around saying that personal morality didn't matter. Go ahead and party hard and indulge all your impulses because the body is unimportant – all that really mattered to them was a kind of mystical enlightenment. And those stories about Jesus, they were just myths and legends that symbolized a greater spiritual reality. They didn't really happen.

This obviously runs counter to biblical teaching, and Peter wrote his second letter to refute such teaching. The faithful church members were disturbed and shaken by these false teachers, so Peter encouraged them by saying, "Don't listen to them. They're selling you a line. Listen to me. I was there."

I love television advertisements. They never cease to amuse me, especially when I consider the view of the world they present to us. If television advertisements were correct, then all the roads that we drove our new cars on would wind through beautiful mountains. Every time we went into McDonald's, we would see children laughing and having a ball. Every movie would be a blockbuster, every soft drink would make our life more fun, and every used car dealer would have a deal that we just couldn't miss. The underlying message of most television commercials is: "You have a hole in your heart, and our product can fill it. Our product will make your life complete."

But Peter shouts out "No! Don't listen to them! They're selling you a line. Listen to me. I was there." He does this by restating the basic story of the gospel in 2 Peter 1:3-4. God, in his love for us, has promised that he will deliver us from the corruption of sin and will enable us to have an eternal relationship with him. Peter says that this is all you *really* need for fulfillment. Everything else is just gravy.

But those other teachers are out there, and their stories sound so good. I hear their messages on commercials. This one teacher even has a special on PBS. They can't be all that bad, can they? Maybe, just maybe, I'll get that new Cadillac, and then I'll be truly

happy. Maybe, just maybe, my lottery number will hit and then I'll be truly happy. "No. Don't listen to them. They're selling you a line."

Peter does several things at this point to build up his readers' faith so that they will avoid the false teachers. Today, we're going to look at two of Peter's techniques for building faith. First, Peter builds his readers' faith by offering them a challenge. Notice that Peter encourages them to "make every effort to supplement your faith" (2 Pet. 1:5), and then he lists off all these great things with which they should supplement their faith. Look at verse 10: "be ... more zealous." Peter knows that we cannot build faith without practicing it. Remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:24-25. Athletes train their bodies, and we should train our hearts through prayer and application of the Scripture to our lives.

In college, I was a student advisor to incoming freshmen. All the kids that I had to deal with were very bright. But there were a couple who struggled academically. In talking with them I figured out that for them high school was easy – they scored very high grades without having to study at all. They were able to coast through school without developing the discipline of focused study. Now, here they were in college, faced with more intense pressure and more exacting demands upon them, but they had no study skills and little to speak of in terms of personal discipline. That first semester, they just hit a wall, their grades suffered, and they had to start learning some habits really quickly.

Peter tells us that to build our faith, we need to practice it more and more every day. We need to practice all these virtues that Peter lists: faith – that is, trusting in God's providence when things get tough; virtue – courage in the face of adversity; knowledge – a deeper appreciation of who God is, who we are, and what the difference is; self-control – a restraining of our desires and passions to come into line with Scripture; steadfastness – patience with others who really grind on our nerves; godliness – an awareness of the presence of God around you. These are our exercises that we should practice daily so that we can build upon our faith. Peter knows that there are those out there who want you to skip practice and play hooky, and he's saying, "No, don't listen to them. Listen to me. Practice your faith daily."

Peter encourages his readers to practice their faith on a daily basis, but he knows that his readers need more encouragement. So, he goes on to remind them of the great story of the faith.

In 2 Peter 1:12-15 we see that Peter recognizes his audience is advanced in the faith. They are spiritually mature, so what does Peter do? He says he will continue to remind them, and he wants them to remember.

The movie *The Lion King* came out a few years ago. There's one scene where the young Simba, who ran away from the rights and responsibilities of kingship, is visited by the ghost of his father. The ghost tells Simba that he has forgotten who he is and that he must remember. Peter is doing something quite similar, encouraging his readers to remember the promises of God and who they are as God's people.

My parents used to take me to my mother's family reunion. It used to be held every year in the VFW hall in Union, South Carolina. I remember how over 100 people would show up and we'd have a potluck supper that would last forever. And then after all the tables were cleared, all the older people would sit in the rocking chairs on the porch and they would begin to tell stories about the family: Uncle Joe's time as a seabee in the Pacific during WWII; my grandfather's experiences coaching basketball when he had never played the game before; stories about the depression, and farm life, and the old south. These stories gave us identity. They passed on to the younger generation a sense of heritage, and they gave the older generation a sense of being and belonging. These shared stories are what made us a family.

Peter makes the point that we need to hear the stories of who we are again and again. It doesn't matter how established we are in the faith, we need to hear the stories again and again. This is what the Hebrews did. Think about psalm 78. This psalm talks about retelling the story of God's deliverance of Israel. Think about Deuteronomy 6:4-5 which pictures a community of people engaged in telling their story to each other during the daily moments of their lives. Brothers and sisters, the biblical picture is that of a community that comes together constantly to tell the stories of faith and to celebrate God's Law.

So, when the false teachers come in saying that Jesus was a myth, that he was a great ethical teacher but he wasn't the Son of God, Peter replies, "No, Don't listen to them. Listen to me. Remember the stories."

What do we do with these encouragements that Peter gives the church? First, I think we immerse ourselves in Scripture. The challenge to read the Bible five minutes a day is a great start. Let the stories and the teachings wash over you and continue to shape your soul. Then I say we should fellowship – not just on Sunday. We should get together in groups and talk about the faith, the Scriptures, and what Jesus is doing in our lives. Oh yes, talk about other stuff too, but don't neglect talking about faith with the people in your own church. As the scripture challenges you, set some goals for application, and have someone hold you to that goal. Help each other to remember and help each other to be challenged.

When I first came to my current church, I struggled. Most of the people there had been in the faith a lot longer than I have. Most of them were a lot wiser than I am. And most had seen a lot more of life than I've ever seen. And as I prayed about it, I came across this passage. It showed me that no matter how advanced we are in the faith, no matter how wise we are, we are always in need of hearing the stories again. We are always in need of being challenged anew. Why? Because the false teachers are out there and they want you. Don't listen to them. They're selling you a line. Listen to Peter. He will challenge you. He will remind you of the great story of God's redeeming love.