

# Where There's A Swill, There's Astray

2 Peter 2:17-22    March 29, 2026

In the mid 1800's, New York was rocked by a terrible and deadly scandal. Clean drinking water was scarce, so demand for milk skyrocketed. Local distilleries realized they could cash in on this market. So, they brought in cows to milk. And then they had a *great* business idea: Why not feed the cows with the grain mash that was leftover from making whiskey?<sup>1</sup>

The problem is, cows don't want to eat hot alcohol mash. In fact, the cows would only eat it if they were starving.<sup>2</sup> And so that's exactly what these milkers did. The diseased cows would be held up by ropes - milked as they were dying.<sup>3</sup> Many of the cows' teeth had rotted out and tails had fallen off. The lifespan of of a cow in one of these places was about 6 months.

Their milk was known as *swill* milk. It was a grotesque, bluish liquid mixture of milk, pus, and dirty water added to stretch out the yield.<sup>4</sup> To make it more palatable to customers, it was thickened with rotten eggs and molasses. To make it white, they'd stir in plaster of Paris.<sup>5</sup> And then it was loaded up into a truck whose side said, "Pure Country Milk."<sup>6</sup> And day after day, the children drank.

By the late 1830's, swill milk made up "between 50 and 80% of all milk consumed in America's large northeastern cities."<sup>7</sup> As a result, 8,000 infants were dying every year in New York City alone.

In 1858, a journalist named Frank Leslie published an exposé on swill milk, leading to an outcry from the public. What did the distilleries do? They "hired chemists to run experiments showing that not only was swill milk not a danger, it was positively healthier for children."

One of the major reasons the scourge of swill milk was finally defeated was a man named Nathan Straus understood the danger. He used his own wealth to provide pasteurization equipment for New York City's orphanage. At his own expense, he established 297 milk stations in 36 cities. It is estimated that Nathan directly saved the lives of 445,000 children.<sup>8</sup> But someone had to sound the alarm *and* give the equipment needed for those lives to be saved.

That's what Peter did in this letter. False teachers were selling lethal spiritual milk and fighting hard against anyone who questioned them. They were especially targeting those who were brand new Christians - babies in the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Bee Wilson *The Swill Is Gone* (New York Times, September 29, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> E.H. Bartley, W.H. Brewer *Distillery-Swill As A Food For Milch-Cows*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2025/07/swill-milk-when-distilleries-defiled-dairy/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1858/05/13/78535562.pdf?pdf\\_redirect=true&ip=0](https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1858/05/13/78535562.pdf?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0)

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swill\\_milk\\_scandal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swill_milk_scandal)

<sup>6</sup> <https://bigthink.com/the-past/swill-milk-scandal/>

<sup>7</sup> Richard Menkel *Save The Babes: American Public Health Reform And The Prevention Of Infant Mortality*

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/magazine/the-milk-man/>

**2 Peter 2:17 - <sup>17</sup> These people are springs without water, mists driven by a storm. The gloom of darkness has been reserved for them.**

This text is very similar to Jude 12 and 13. Both writers stack up metaphors to make it clear who these guys really are underneath. They're springs without water. You go there to get a drink, to keep yourself alive, but there's no water. You can't slake your thirst or irrigate your crops.

They're mists driven by a storm. They are blown about by their own whims or various trends that come through. Offering relief, they leave you high and dry. In the arid climate of the middle east, the land *needed* the nourishing moisture of mist, but before the dry land is able to soak anything up, here comes the wind to blow it away.<sup>9</sup>

Jude says they're like hidden reefs. You're sailing along, thinking you've got clear seas, but then you run into these teachers and the hull of your life is torn open. They are shepherds who only look after themselves. He says they are fruitless trees, *twice* dead and uprooted.

Could the apostles be any clearer? This is who these guys are. In verses 10 through 16, Peter explains their character. In 17 through 22, he explains the *consequences* of following them. The impact they make on people's lives.<sup>10</sup> He puts the bottom line up front: They're headed to the gloom of darkness. Remember that image from verse 4? That's the place the evil angels are held until judgment. And these false teachers *and* their followers are sailing to *that* port.

Meanwhile, where does our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ lead us? Here's what Isaiah said:

**Isaiah 58:11 - <sup>11</sup> The LORD will always lead you, satisfy you in a parched land, and strengthen your bones. You will be like a watered garden and like a spring whose water never runs dry.**

Oh, the absolute opposite! Sustained and satisfied and thriving and bearing fruit because our Lord is *not* a spring without water. Ask of Him and He will give you *living* water.<sup>11</sup>

**2 Peter 2:18 - <sup>18</sup> For by uttering boastful, empty words, they seduce, with fleshly desires and debauchery, people who have barely escaped from those who live in error.**

Why would anyone follow these false teachers? They offered freedom. Pleasure. All you could possibly want for yourself. "Pure Country Milk."

Barely escaped here refers to those who were recently coming to faith in Christ.<sup>12</sup> So here you are, a Gentile who lived a pagan life of sexual promiscuity, gluttony, drunkenness, no restraint, all selfishness. You hear the Gospel of Jesus and you realize that here are the answers your soul has been groping for deep in your heart all your life. But, just as you start to step into a life of faith,

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Schreiner *The New American Commentary, Volume 37: 1, 2 Peter, Jude*

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Moo *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Peter, Jude*

<sup>11</sup> John 4:10

<sup>12</sup> Schreiner

these people, claiming to be Christians, claiming to have secret enlightenment, *they* come to you and say, "You can have Jesus *and* paganism. There is no need to follow any law. We're *free* from the Law." And the way they said it was awfully impressive. People new to the faith are vulnerable.

Some speakers or leaders or content creators *are* incredibly impressive in the way they communicate. But what is the content? Where do their directions lead? It is the *substance* that matters, not the show. Not the stage or the fanfare or the charisma. Consider the content.

**2 Peter 2:19 - <sup>19</sup> They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption, since people are enslaved to whatever defeats them.**

They offered *total* freedom. Not just from *the* Law, but from *any* law. "You can be your own master. After all, the apostles didn't know what they were talking about. And Jesus is never coming back!"

But friends, *all* of us must serve a master. When a person says they are their own master, in reality they're enslaved to their sin. You can either serve the law of God or the law of sin.<sup>13</sup> Those who say they're enjoying the pleasures of life, look at the swill they're drinking. If you're free, why are you addicted? If you're free, why are you depressed? Why are you aimless? Why do you have to fight your way up the ladder? Why do those one-night stands leave you feeling more and more alone? If you want to be free, serve Jesus. Yes, that means you are His bondservant, but He promises:

**John 8:32 - <sup>32</sup> You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**

**John 15:15 - <sup>15</sup> I do not call you servants anymore, because a servant doesn't know what his master, is doing. I have called you friends**

Christ is a Master Who does not drain your life, exploit you, and shackle you. He *fills* your life to overflowing. We've never seen, heard, or can conceive of the good He intends to do for us.

He is a kind and generous Master, but He *is* a Master. He commands you and I to obey His law of love. The royal law, prescribed in Scripture.<sup>14</sup> Christ has rules and directions, designs and boundaries for our relationships, our choices, our words, our attitudes, our activities, all of life. But when we obey, when we serve Him as Master, *then* we receive true freedom, true fulfillment.

**2 Peter 2:20 - <sup>20</sup> For if, having escaped the world's impurity through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in these things and defeated, the last state is worse for them than the first.**

Peter's previous life as a fisherman echoes through this passage. When he said "seduce," he speaks of a lure - bait on a hook. Here, we imagine the fisherman's nets entangling an unfortunate soul.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Romans 7:25

<sup>14</sup> James 2:8

<sup>15</sup> Moo

Verses 20 through 22 can cause doctrinal debate or confusion. Is Peter saying that a person can be *genuinely* saved, but *lose* their salvation? That is the perspective of some Christians. Our answer to that specific question is *no* because of many Scriptures, but Peter himself said in his *first* letter:

**1 Peter 1:5 - You are being guarded by God's power through faith for a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.**

If a person is truly saved, they are safe. They may have lapses of obedience, leading to terrible consequences and the breaking of God's heart and the loss of rewards, but *no one* can snatch them out of Jesus' hand - including themselves!<sup>16</sup> So what are we to make of verses 20 through 22?

In verse 20, Peter gives this warning to the false teachers and those who follow them, saying, "If you go this way, the last state is worse than the first." Why?

For one, they *think* they're living the Christian life. These people *claimed* to be Christian. But if you do not walk the path of righteousness, if you do not obey Jesus, you do not love Him and you do not know Him. Jesus said in John 14, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments!" Very simple. These folks *thought* they were sailing to heaven, when in reality their destination was hell.

Second, the Bible teaches there will be *worse* judgment for those who hear the truth and reject it.<sup>17</sup>

Third, when we choose to harden our hearts toward the Lord, toward His truth, we are *always* worse off than before.<sup>18</sup> That much further from God. That much more ensnared by sin. In fact, if we keep hardening our hearts, God allows us to that much more deceived by the lies.<sup>19</sup>

We can see that the people Peter is talking about were not *truly* saved. Because, after all, they were *defeated* by temptation and sin. If you are saved, God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able to withstand.<sup>20</sup> That's a promise. To be a Christian means to be a person who is led by God in *victory* - in Christ's triumphal procession!<sup>21</sup> Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. If they are ultimately defeated by sin and temptation, it is because they do not have the Spirit of God living in them.

**2 Peter 2:21 - <sup>21</sup> For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy command delivered to them.**

The "holy command" means the whole Christian message, sent from God, delivered through the Scriptures and by the teaching of the apostles. Again, note that we *are* under a law. It is the law of

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<sup>16</sup> John 10:28

<sup>17</sup> 1 Timothy 1:13, Luke 10:13-16, Luke 12:47-48

<sup>18</sup> Hebrews 3:15

<sup>19</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12

<sup>20</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:13

<sup>21</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:14

love, but these are *commands*. Jesus puts demands on your life. He demands surrender. He demands devotion. He demands obedience.

**2 Peter 2:22 - <sup>22</sup> It has happened to them according to the true proverb: A dog returns to its own vomit, and, "A washed sow returns to wallowing in the mud."**

To us, dogs are beloved companions. Not so in this time. They were despised creatures.<sup>22</sup> Even today, some of you have dogs who eat from the litter box. We see dogs lap up vomit. It's horrible.

But *that's* what was happening on the spiritual level. It *wasn't* enlightenment. It was swill. So what are we drinking? Is it swill milk? If so, the result is going to be waste and barrenness and death.

For anyone still worrying that they might, through mistakes or distraction, *lose* or *forfeit* their salvation, consider the illustration Peter used. Dogs and pigs were unclean animals. And at the end of the proverb, the dogs were still dogs, the pigs were still pigs. In other words, they may have cleaned off the sow, and put some lipstick on her, but her *nature* wasn't changed.<sup>23</sup> They were never transformed. It doesn't say the dog *became* a lamb then turned back into a dog.

We can go back to the examples of Lot and Balaam. Both had issues with greed. But one *believed* and the other did not. If losing your salvation was possible, *Lot* would've lost his. And yet he is thrice called a *righteous* man *by Peter!* Ultimately, he obeyed by faith. That was the difference.

So, how can you be sure you're a Christian? Well, listen to James:

**James 1:25 - <sup>25</sup> But the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who works—this person will be blessed in what he does.**

A hearer *and* a doer. As you *do* God's word, the authenticity of your faith is revealed. That you *are* a lamb, not a dog.

It's said that the swill milk manufacturers could literally be smelled a mile away.<sup>24</sup> It stunk of waste and death. With God's wisdom and warnings, we should be able to see false teachers a mile away.

Instead of drinking their swill, you and I must drink deep of the living water, feeding on the milk and the meat not of the culture around us, but the word of God. And do you know what happens then? Not only do you and I get to *enjoy* Christ's living water, He promises that we will have streams of living water flowing from deep within us!<sup>25</sup> You and I become spiritual Nathan Strauses, bringing life, saving lives, protecting the weak, the vulnerable, those the false teachers want to prey on. And in living out the Christian life, we will be blessed in what we do.

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<sup>22</sup> Gene Green *Jude & 2 Peter*

<sup>23</sup> Dick Lucas & Christopher Green *The Message Of 2 Peter & Jude*

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/magazine/the-milk-man/>

<sup>25</sup> John 7:38