



There was a man named Frank Soslenski, who lived in Louisville, Kentucky and was a mail carrier. The amazing thing about Frank was that despite the fact that he really didn't seem in great shape, no other mail carrier seemed to be able to get their route done faster than he did. And no matter how heavy the bags of mail seemed to be or what time of the year it was Frank always was the first man to arrive back home. Then one day, a few complaints arose concerning mail that had been sent but never arrived. They were linked to Frank's route. So they started an investigation sending specific letters destined for Frank's route. Then when they didn't arrive at all, someone was assigned to follow Frank as he made his deliveries. To their surprise, Frank's first stop on that morning was to his own house. When he left his house his mail bag was empty. After obtaining a search warrant, they found 15 tons of mail in Frank's attic. He had 1200 bags of undelivered mail stashed between his rafters!

Now while none of us really enjoy receiving bills in the mail, one of the first things we all do when we arrive home in the evening checking our mail boxes as we know that some of letters could have life-changing consequences for our lives. That is why we have jumped into this new series called "You've Got Mail," taken from Revelations 2 & 3, which has the idea that God, through the Apostle John, has sent letters to 7 specific churches on the Roman Mail Route in Asia, (modern day Turkey) that have words for specific local churches. In turn, these letters can have some very important applications for us in Calgary and even more specifically for us at Brentview.

We started by looking at the astounding church at Smyrna, who stayed faithful to Jesus despite the fact that some of their people were being martyred for their faith. Then last week we looked at the city of Ephesus where Jesus says that despite the fact that they were a busy, impressive and well known church, they had been distracted by doing things for God, which resulted in their losing their first love. They needed to remember what it felt like, what they acted like when they first became Christ followers so Jesus could return to them the joy of their salvation. Now let's open the third letter to the city of Pergamum.

I. The City of Pergamum

Revelations 2:12 – 17, "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of Him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He, who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it."

Forty miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea, the road turns Northeast along the Caicus River to the capital city of Asia called Pergamum (modern day Bergama.) Where Ephesus was the thriving heart of the province (like Calgary is.) Pergamum, (under the Romans,) was made the capital of the province (like Edmonton.) Its strong fortifications were built on the highest piece of ground for miles. On the top of this fortification were very impressive palaces, government buildings and of course, temples. Pergamum has the

steepest theatre in Turkey, which can seat 15,000 people. The Pergamum Coliseum has not been unearthed yet, (Tourism is still new in Turkey,) but if you look up at the hillside you can see the theatre, some of the fortification and the temple of Zeus. There were 4 large temples on top of the hill, the largest being for Dionysus (goddess of Wine, Women, and Song,) and the temple of Zeus. And off to one side of the temple, right where these trees are, there was an Altar to Zeus cut out of a huge outcropping rock. This altar was stolen by German archaeologists and presently is in a museum in Berlin. There is much bad blood over this.

As you go down the mountain, you will find the remains of the Red Temple, (an Egyptian Fertility god,) which was connected to the Healing Courts known as the Asclepium. This was a healing center where they used special dramas, special waters, wore special clothing and allowed snakes to crawl upon them to bring about healing. But, if they weren't healed they were led through this tunnel where someone would whisper from the hidden doors in the roof, that they should go to the healing hot pools in a place called Hierapolis, most people died there. While we were at Asclepium, I saw this empty wheel chair. It seemed like a fitting shot, but it was for tourist use only. I also climbed up over a wall and took a picture of this group of 'modern day' followers of these healing practices, who were hoping to be healed by some of these old occult rituals.

What I found interesting was that Pergamum has much in common with Calgary. First, it was known as an intellectual city. It was a University town, as we have just said it had its healing centers, which in those days were viewed much like the University of Calgary's Medical School. We also know that it was an intellectual center as the city had one of the largest Libraries in the world with over 200,000 hand copied papyrus manuscripts. What is interesting was that the king, in an attempt to make Pergamum's library the largest in the world, tried to entice the head librarian away from the Library in Alexandria. When the ruler of Egypt found out, he threw the head librarian in jail and cut off the supply of Papyri, (on which books were written,) to the city of Pergamum. You have heard that necessity is the mother of invention. What happened was that someone from Pergamum invented a new product to write on, (a technique of using animal skins – which was better than the Papyri of Egypt,) which became their key export to the world. (When someone graduates, they get their sheep skin - here is where that idea came from.) This re-established them as a world class intellectual center. So Pergamum was a capital city and an educational center, one in which they felt they were intellectual leaders and cutting edge thinkers in their world.

II. The Credentials

It was to this city that Jesus addresses His letter. As you will remember, with each specific letter to individual churches, Jesus describes himself in a way that is relevant to the situation in which the church is located.

Revelations 2:12, *"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword."*

The moment He mentioned this sword with 2 sharp cutting edges, all those listening could picture it because it sounded like the kind of sword a Roman soldier would carry. But then in their minds, I think they would have realized that Jesus was piggy-backing on something he had just said in Revelations 1:13 - 15 that described when John had caught his first glimpse of Jesus. Look at Revelations 1:16, *"In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."*

Here is Jesus about to speak to a congregation who lives in this self proclaimed intellectual city and believe they know the answer to any question. They believed that because they are so modern and progressive, what they believe must be true. Jesus begins with this colourful metaphor and image that His words come out of His mouth is powerful, sharper than a double-edged sword and has the ability to cut through ideas, belief systems and intellectual arguments to come to the real truth. In other words, in a world that is full of the noise of so many claiming to be the arbiters of truth and right thought, Jesus says His words are the real basis of truth. John 12:47- 48, *“As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words...”* He is saying, before we go any farther, you need to know that because my words, written or spoken, come from me are truth. John McArthur puts it this way, *“Out of all the voices calling out to me. I choose to believe the voice of Truth.”*

III. The Compliments

Revelations 2:13, *“I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.”*

I love this line, *“I know where you live.”* It sounds like a threat from a gangster, *“Be careful because I know where you live.”* Here, it is saying the exact opposite; Jesus is saying *“I know the circumstances in which you live as a church and as individuals. I know those things that you find easy and I know what is hard on you.”* Every time I read that line in these passages, I am struck with the assurance that nothing I go through goes unnoticed by my God. That gives me hope. And I am struck that nothing we do or say in or around this church goes without Jesus hearing it. (Proverbs 5:21, *“For man’s ways are in full view of the Lord.”*) This brings me back to that wonderful verse we found in Proverbs 11:25 where it says, *“He who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.”*

Look what He says next, *“I know where you live; you live where Satan has his throne.”* It is one thing to say, I know you are from Edmonton and the sign used to say, “The City of Champions” or Winkler, Manitoba’s sign that said, “The Sunflower Capital of the World” but it is something else altogether to say, “Your city is where Satan has his throne.” Don’t miss that Satan is a created being and while he may have influence as the “prince of this world,” he is not God and he can not be at all places as once. So why was Pergamum Satan’s hometown at that time? Some believe it goes back to the fact that on their hillside, they had the huge altar to Zeus, on which they made daily sacrifices. It could be because in the temple of Dionysus, who was the goddess of wine, women and song, that open sexual activity was applauded. But let me take you back to the picture I showed you from the Asclepium healing center. Can you see what is on the pillar as you enter the sight? They are snakes. Key to their worship was putting on special clothing and then sleeping at places where snakes would crawl across you. (The Doctors prescribed this as part of their modern therapeutic treatments.)

Here is an early medical symbol. I think in the Old Testament when Moses placed the serpent on a pole. He was using an old Egyptian symbol they understood and God simply infused it with new meaning, showing them who was the true God. But here in Pergamum, when you went to the Red Temple or Asclepium Healing Center, (where there were snakes slithering everywhere, if a snake bit you, you knew you were blessed.) Snakes were central to their beliefs and worship. Do you remember how Satan is often described in the Bible as the

'old serpent?' It seems to me that Satan was somehow very present in this town where these Christians were living.

The result was in Revelations 2:13, where it says a man named Antipas, (possibly their pastor,) was grabbed and some say he was placed inside a metal brass bull and roasted to death slowly, to try and force him to recant his faith.) But he stayed true to his faith in Jesus to his death. The church continued to share their faith in Jesus with others. Think what it would be like if one of our pastoral staff had died in that fashion, or if our faith was illegal, our ability to give charitable receipts taken back and occult leaders praying daily in the temple on the hillside to a very present Satan asking him to harm us? How would that affect how we lived out our faith at school or at work? This group of Christians stayed true to their faith; God blessed them and that should challenge us.

III. The Criticism

Revelation 2:14 – 15, *“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”*

After reading this passage, in the light of what we have just talked about, I am a little in awe of this group of believers. Look at Revelations 2 :14 - 15. Did you notice two things? (1) This church had stayed so strong against the attack but Satan was somehow using Christians from within the church to hamper this wonderful church. Don't miss this. Satan can use Christians to help destroy the church of Jesus Christ. As you see, they were Christians, (from within the church,) who thought they knew more and with subtle words, formed groups within the church that were more dangerous than the persecution within and were being Satan's tools to hurt the church. (2) I need to also add that the key ways the church in Pergamum was being attacked are ways that are similar to how I think Satan attacks churches in Calgary, especially those who live where the city sees themselves as modern in their thinking, intellectually progressive their beliefs and open in how they look at life.

Let me give you two examples:

A. Sex and the Holodeck

Revelation 2:14, *“You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.”* There are people in the church who are teaching these things? What are they teaching? They hold fast to the teachings of Balaam.

In order to find out what this was about, you need to go back to Numbers 23 & 24. It is this strange story of how as Israel was marching through the desert, after leaving Egypt, and they ended up traveling through the country of Moab. The king of Moab, Balaam, paid a priest to curse Israel and every time he tried to curse them, he couldn't get the words out. But because he wanted the money, he came up with a simple scheme. It was to send a group of beautiful, sexy Moabite women toward the Israelite men, who would fall in love, (or at least lust,) have sex with them and before long marry them and have kids. Here is the kicker. They will then follow the god's of Moab and therefore not follow the ways of God and fall out of the blessings of God.

Now don't forget the setting in which the Pergamum church lives. It is in a city which believes that sexual freedom is not only ok; it is to be flaunted. The temples on the hill were full of temple prostitutes and the Roman culture was for sex with anyone; the kinkier the better, the

more perverted and degrading to the other person the better. So Jesus is saying, *“I am hearing that people within your church is teaching free and open sexual behaviour .. and you as Christians are doing things sexually as single folk and married folk which is wrong. You have bought the lie of the intellectuals in your city .. that ‘as long as your sexual actions are between 2 consenting adults it is OK. You have become just like the followers of satan around you.”*

Then he adds in verse 15, *“Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”* Here is the scary part. You see, as we said last week, the Nicolaitans were a group causing divisions in a number of churches. They were teaching that because God’s grace is so wonderful, if you commit any sin, God will always forgive; therefore, you can sex around all you want, knowing that God will always forgive you. What they were doing was twisting scripture to give them the freedom to sin sexually like everyone else in their culture. It is the idea some of my friends in Grand Cache had; they could party hard, mess around sexually all they wanted on Saturday night but they needed to make sure they were in church Sunday morning for ‘confession’ so they would be forgiven. They used God’s forgiveness as a tool to ‘live like the devil.’ That is why I entitled this section Sex and the Holodeck. It is like on Star Trek, people could do anything they wanted in the Holodeck and it was as if it never happened. Only it did happen.

So here is the first issue, (from this passage,) that we need to wrestle with. Have we been buying into what a society says concerning issues like abortion, homosexuality, pre-marital sex or even affairs after we are married? Have we been playing the same game that these folks had been playing, “because God is all loving, full of grace, loves to forgive us, it is ok for me to do these things?”

Look at verse 16, *“Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”* Jesus says if you do not repent, (not only ask for forgiveness but stop doing what you are doing and change your ways,) I will fight against you. I will move against you. My grace and my second chances will dry up and I will judge you harshly. Plus, like in the Moabite example, remember their sin led to the fact that God’s blessings completely dried up in their lives. Please hear the warning in this passage and remember that if we play loose with God’s sexual rules, (no matter what our society says,) God will stand against you and His blessings will dry up in your life (and sad to say, often it will hurt those you love the most.) Others will walk away from Jesus. The single greatest cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips and then walk out the door and deny Him by their lifestyle.

B. Truth and the Word

As we looked at verse 16, we saw that much that happened flowed from people who played with scripture. They felt that although the Bible (Old Testament) spoke against sins like sex out of marriage, etc., they (in 90 AD) were now living in an enlightened age, and as a University town full of well read people, that if they came to a conclusion that free sex or some sexual action, (that they felt were ok,) then it was ok. Then anyone who disagreed with them was outdated, not modern and certainly not intellectually relevant. So the Christians who had believed and followed the Bible started to question the scriptures. You know how it happens; you’ve seen it:

Step #1: you rightly understand that because the bible has parts of it that are poetry, dreams, allegories and stories to make points, that you shouldn't take every word in a literal sense. (That is completely true.)

Step #2 – then you hit a few things in the Old Testament that you struggle with, you actually don't like them very much so you want to put them on the shelf and kind of leave them out of the Bible. (In your mind, like Thomas Jefferson, whose Bible had all kinds of passages cut out of it.)

Step #3 – then some 'intellectual,' (who wrote a book or has an article on the internet,) starts giving reasons why other scriptures can't be true and in your mind you start wondering if you need to cut out other things beside Old Testament stories. (None of us want to be seen as outdated, less than intellectual or narrow minded conservatives.) You're leaning starts shifting from our first response to believe the Word to disbelieving the Word.

Step #4 - there are things either you want to do or society says it is ok to do, which the Bible says are wrong and you decide that maybe the Bible may not be right in this area. [Note: I know I have made this too simplistic as I know that there are issues in the Bible which we, as 'thinking Christians,' need to wrestle with a lot more than we have].

Here is my point. What happens often is that we become arbiters of the scripture instead of letting it become an arbiter in our lives. This takes us back to how Jesus began by describing Himself at the beginning of the passage as the one who had the sharp double edged sword coming out of His mouth. Remember, we said that this meant that His words, which comes out of His mouth are powerful and sharper than a double-edged sword and it has the ability to cut through ideas, belief systems and intellectual arguments until it brings us to the real truth.

Listen to Hebrews. 4:12 – 13, *"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."* Jesus is saying that His Word comes from his heart and therefore has His backing and wisdom behind them. We need to understand that if we play loose and be free with it, that the result will be like it was with the Pergamum church. If we disobey it, we will step out of God's blessing. The point is, when we let truth slide, it isn't long until it no longer will have an influence on our life. If we have been doing that, God calls us in verse 16 to repent and start living like a Christian.

IV. The Challenge is Simple

Revelations 2:17, *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it."* If we stay close to His Word, Jesus will give us His 'hidden manna' (Refer to Exodus 16:15, *"When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat."*)

In other words, He will allow you to find in His Word, precious, sweet, life-sustaining and life-energizing gifts of truth that will warm your heart and guide your walk in life. And He will write a new name on a 'white stone,' which is the idea that God will give you a friendship name that you can grow into. Like David, the soldier became "a friend of God" and Peter became 'The rock,' (upon which so many things were built on in our faith.) If we follow Him closely we will find a new depth in our walk with God.

Let me close with is this. Keeping in mind the lessons from the Pergamum church, let me say that I have no question that many of us would be willing to lay down our life for our faith. The harder question may be. Have we been compromising the very truth that we would be willing to die for? I pray that God can find us faithful with our life and with our actions.

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