



### 3. Fooled by Fakes! (Rev 2:12-17)

Fakes. Fake tan. Fake Rolex. Fake diamonds. Fake perfume. Fake ID. Fake fingernails. Whatever the fake may be, we know that faking something is intending to make people believe that something false is true. And often it works as perhaps some of us have found out to our cost in the past.

Just as things can be fakes, things we hear as “Christian teaching” can be fake too. The problem is that when someone claims to be something, it's only by their fruits that we know them and that can take a while before we spot them.

The story of Pergamum is the story of a church fooled by fakes. In their case, people were teaching stuff that was already pronounced as not of God by the Council of Jerusalem in Acts and by Paul in 1 Corinthians – and this stuff would have been in circulation by the writing in Revelation. The message of Jesus given by John here is the same but in Pergamum the believers accepted and tolerated them rather than deal with the situation.

Pergamum was a difficult environment in which to be a Christian in. It was the administrative centre of the Roman colony of Asia and for the Greek and Roman religions. That's why Jesus describes it as the seat of Satan. It was a centre of idolatry and Christians were not viewed sympathetically.

They were a well thought of church in this environment of persecution. Unlike Smyrna which was about to undergo persecution, they had already suffered it and Antipas had paid the price for believing with his life. V13 - *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.* They had stuck in there through thick and thin. Remember, last week we read how the people in Smyrna were being encouraged to do this. They had already done it in Pergamum.

That was good? Yes it was. But sticking in there and being faithful did not entitle them to then behave in any way they wanted to. The persevering church had a weakness – it was tolerating sin in its midst.

In fact the church was beset in two ways: *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. 15 Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* Between them they were undermining the church because their teaching was fake in one way or another. Unfortunately, toleration of them was placing the church at Pergamum in jeopardy.

As far as I can see, there was not a lot of difference between Balaamites and the Nicolaitans. Their sins were fundamentally the same. Let's see who these people were.

I don't think those holding the teaching of Balaam called themselves Balaamites. Jesus was using the word to show what they were like. They were members of the church who were acting like Balaam did in the book of Numbers. If you remember from the OT, Balaam was hired by Balak King of Moab to curse the Israelites because Balaam was a prophet of God. By and large it looks in Numbers 24 that Balaam's story is positive. Balaam is prompted to bless Israel and curse Moab! Needless to say, he didn't get his

fee. So what was so bad about Balaam? It would seem that Balaam's contact with Balak had a negative outcome too. His discussion with Balak gave the idea to the Moabites of using sex to entrap the Israelites and cause them to sin. His careless talk and relationship with Balak resulted in a disastrous episode in the history of Israel – and thousands died as a result.

That's exactly what people were doing in Pergamum. And there were people in their own midst - Christians - accepted in the fellowship suggesting that it was OK to flirt with the world, eat food sacrificed to idols and be sexually immoral. Eating at the temples of pagan gods was a social thing. So Christians went to the parties and orgies. It kept them from being suspected of being Christians. I suspect that they even justified it by saying that they were trying to reach the lost! This wasn't new. It was one of the many sins of Corinth which we have studied in the last couple of years.

In contrast, the Nicolaitans were a group of people that operated within the church and had more systematically embraced the teachings of paganism. Perhaps they were the logical end to those who said that it was OK – they formed themselves into a sect.

Either way, they started life as "Balaam". Just talking to them won't hurt. It's only meat. Just a little something of what I fancy won't hurt anyone. Their tolerance had become the thin end of the wedge and they were well on their way to embracing a fake faith.

Why was what they were doing so wrong. It's obvious I guess but let me spell it out to you:

- Idolatry
- Immorality
  
- Idolatry

What is it? Making anything else take the place of God or rank as god in any kind of capacity. The first (and second) commandment is a simple one - *"You shall have no other gods before me. 4 "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandment*

Simple and obvious. But let's understand how people break it. In the days of Israel it was not often a case of rejecting God and replacing Him? They adopted the gods of the Amorites to hedge their bets. They worshipped God and then they had their Baal groves and Asherah poles. But then we look again at what God said: *for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God.* God doesn't share with a lump of wood! Think of the insult to Him to put objects on a par with the living and true God.

It was the same by Roman times. Roman society out of all classical civilisation is like our modern society. Religion was plural and people had a pick and mix attitude towards it. By the time of Revelation, people were already beginning to mix their Christian faith with Greek religion and philosophy in particular. It led to a whole series of sects like the Nicolaitans.

And Christians have been doing the same for centuries – revering things and people, not instead as God but as well as God. Do we make God share our allegiance with something else in our life. Perhaps it's our family, perhaps it's money, our homes, some activity we

do. And time with God has to vie against all these other things. To have something that keeps you away from time with God, the things of God or the purposes of God in your life is idolatry.

Perhaps you've never thought of it like that. But that's the case. The believers in Pergamum were faithful and persevering, yet they committed Balaam's mistake by spending time doing what they shouldn't have been doing.

God is a jealous God. He doesn't share with your money, or your material things. He demands your first allegiance because He made you and He has redeemed you.

Even legalists like the Ephesians in Revelation 2 found themselves in this problem because they made their zeal for doing things right more important than honouring God. It's possible to be zealous for the things of God - even the Word of God - but not zealous for God. We have a Heavenly Father who desires and deserves our undivided loyalty and attention! Anything less is idolatry.



### Immorality

What is it? Usually sexual in the context of revelation. Exploiting another person for one's own personal gratification,. Just like the first century civilisation, ours has become characterised by the sexual being pushed at us whether we like it or not. It is on our TV, in magazines, on advertising boards - everywhere. What we see with our eyes enters our minds. And we just accept it. And as believers we are under pressure to accept gay relationships and the movement away from marriage.

You might think this doesn't concern you, particularly if you are an older person. But what about all the other things which go with it. We may not be sexually immoral, but we may have some of the things that go with it. Gal 5:19 (C) *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

We have to understand that and as a church we need to look at the list and see them as the fruit of our natural sinful natures – these are not the actions of people in whom God dwells. It's the behaviour of fakes!

But in Pergamum, it wasn't that most of the Pergamites were actually immoral, or idolaters in fact. It's that they tolerated it in their midst and were not doing anything about it. Why is the Christian faith in steep decline in the UK? It's simple. Because we were prepared to tolerate the slide into national sin that so characterizes our nation. We tolerated it. We still tolerate it. Why? Because somewhere in the last 30 years we stopped standing for what we believed in. We separated ourselves from the world and let them do what they liked. And Satan stole our Christian country from us.

This is a nation that is democratic – our Baptist forefathers fought for it. We could have done something about it but we stood back and did nothing. Worse, if we had just preached the gospel we could have done something about it. But the climate in most churches is still that mission is someone else's problem. So Christians don't have a heart for the lost, they don't pray for the lost, they don't reach the lost. And then they wonder why church fellowships are becoming extinct! It's the sin of Balaam that we tolerate. We mess around with the world and wonder why God is angry about it our double standards.

If we want to see change in Swaffham, then we need to get a grip on idolatry and immorality. We are called to be distinctive people. People where God is first in our lives and we are morally exemplary people who stand for the gospel and for the things of God.

Here's a few verses for Romans 13 that I think are for us this morning:

*Rom 13:11 And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

So the message is REPENT – *16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 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.* I believe that a large part of the decline of the church in the UK and inevitably in Norfolk and in Swaffham has been our flirting with the world and our toleration of the fakes. And we see so much in our own lives hate God isn't first and we go our own way. It's time to turn around and go God's way. And Jesus will speak judgement. That judgement is taking away churches and we need to understand that ours will go unless we deal with the situation.

We are called to be overcomers, not capitulators. Are you an overcomer? Is God the only one in your life, or is He being made to share. Are we speaking Christ into people's lives – or are we tolerating whatever we get thrown at us?

Why are we called into repentance. Because Jesus wants us to be in the holy place with Him and we can't be if we're living a fake faith where God battles for our allegiance and where we tolerate all sorts of nonsense.

If we want to grow, we need to be overcomers and what do we find – we get fed! Jesus uses the picture of manna in the tabernacle to say – if you come into the holy place because you have repented, then I'll feed you. And the white stone. A reference to what was called a tessera – a stone given as an entry token – to a temple for example. It was also a mark of friendship. Let's put aside Balaam and be overcomers. Let's grow and let's see God work in our fellowship and town.

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