

The Real Deal?



Revelation 2:12-17

TITLE

Last week we explored the fact that Jesus welcomes all who come to Him. He accepts all who come to Him. He changes them. His desire is that they change because after all, one day we will be with Him and we will be truly like Him. But how much are we like Him now? Why do I ask? Because God wants to pour out His blessings on His people. He wants us to know and live the benefits of heaven, but so often our choice in life is something short of that: hence the picture of David Dickinson – the man on TV who encourages people getting the real deal – the best deal they can. Here he is receiving a consignment of fake tan off the back of Del's van!

A few months ago we took a look at the Book of Revelation and today I'm going to take another dip, this time at the letter to the church at Pergamum. Each of the seven churches the book was written to had come under pressure and had responded in different ways. All of them were in danger of going in a direction short of what God desired of them. The biggest problem was that they were lured by ideas that seemed appealing but were short of God's glory.

FAKES > ROLEX WATCHES

Here are a few fake pictures. In each, can you spot the fake? At first glance, you usually can't see the difference. But as you get closer you can. Usually the quality of these products is well below par. They fall apart or fail very quickly. Most people who buy fakes usually know they are.

Why do people buy fakes? Because they look and feel like the real thing. You get all the kudos of wearing or using a Rolex watch without paying full price for it. You don't pay full price – but you don't get a decent watch either. Sometimes the stuff is dangerous, like fake electrical products.

One of the biggest challenges of the Christian faith in the 21st century is identical to the first – that there is much presented to us that can fall well short of the blessings God desires for us because it suits us to go with it. The problem is that we are in a world that gives us lots of choices. Have you been in Costas or similar for a CUP OF COFFEE. You'll be presented with loads of options. All I want is a coffee but the choice – skinny, latte, cappuccino, mocha, frappé, americano, espresso. But all I want is a cup of coffee.

SPOILT FOR CHOICE

The Christian faith seems to have a large number of options connected – different types of church, types of worship, doctrines, different denominations – just like the world. Many Christians think that faith is like an a la carte menu – pick what you like, leave what you don't want. The choice is yours or mine.

And therein lies the problem because being a Christian isn't a la carte. Jesus says "follow me": the choice isn't ours but we think it is. And the problem is that we often choose that which looks OK and sits comfortably with us but falls well short of what Jesus wants for us.

It may look good, it may sound good, seem virtuous and make sense, but we won't grow through it and we won't experience the fullness of God's blessings through it.

And are all these right anyway. My experience of almost every expression of the Christian faith is that it is flawed in some way and sometimes those flaws are rather like a bad fake – they're harmful!

PERGAMUM

One of the problems the church at Pergamum was facing was that being a Christian in their city was difficult. It was costly to be a Christian in one of the most pagan cities in the Greco-Roman world. What was so bad about it? It was famed for its pagan worship and even worship of the Roman Emperor, Pergamum was also famed for its ALTAR OF ZEUS.

The Altar was one of the prime worship sites of Zeus. In Revelation Pergamum is described as the seat or throne of Satan. The shrine was most IMPRESSIVE, with its steps and colonnades. In the nineteenth century, someone built a huge model of it in Berlin. It was most impressive. In fact it later impressed Hitler so much that he made an even more impressive version of it in Nuremberg, the Zeppelin-tribune. It was the place where Hitler had his huge rallies in the 1930s – truly the seat of Satan.

OBAMA

Then, to the mystery of many, some bright spark built a replica of the Altar of Zeus for Obama's victory rally in 2008. Hadn't they realised the significance?

THE REAL DEAL

So here was the church at Pergamum. This is what Jesus tells them through John's letter: *These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 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.*

It was a hard place and they had stood firm even under persecution. A strong church, a church to be commended. When it came to standing firm, they were a good sound church. They stood firm. What a great reputation!

But, all this was being undermined because they were allowing something that was not of God into their fellowship. It was something that looked OK, and felt OK, but was not the thing that God wanted for their lives. It was like a fake Rolex or a fake iPhone. It seemed like a good thing to have. It seemed a good thing to do, but it didn't work and the people were falling short of the glory that Jesus desired for them.

It's always been one of the dangers of the church. It's not the onslaught of total error. We can cope with that. It's the acceptance of something that seems reasonable, even virtuous looking that robs us of the blessings that God wants to pour out on us because it isn't quite right.

TWO THINGS

So what was Jesus getting at? Here were the two things:

You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam
You also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans

So what were these teachings?

THE TEACHING OF BALAAM

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 ends up positive. He listens to God and 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.

CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES

This was a slogan used in the second world war. What seemed OK could be taken and used by others to the detriment of everybody. Balaam was careless in the way that he flirted with the Moabites and the effects were tragic on the Israelites. That's exactly what was happening 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. I suspect that they justified it by saying that they were trying to reach the lost! I know this because this wasn't new. It was one of the many sins of Corinth. Eating at the temples of pagan gods was a social thing. So Christians went to the parties and orgies. In a world dominated by paganism, being involved in the society meant that Christians would be seen as part of the community, respectable – but they were flirting with idolatry and their sexual behaviour was dishonouring God.

THE TEACHING OF THE NICOLAITANS

The Nicolaitans took things a stage further – it was a development of the above. The Nicolaitans were a group of people that operated within the church and had more systematically embraced the teachings of paganism. It is an example of what is called syncretism, where adherents integrated the theology of the world around them into the Christian faith, usually finding an argument from the Bible for doing so.

MODERN PARALLELS?

Nicolaitan thought died out quickly in the second century but there have been lots of versions of it in every generation. In our own generation, various versions of liberal theology follow the same pattern. This message very pertinent to the Christian faith today. In recent years we have had an assault on the Christian faith by the ideas of the world which are dominated by modern idolatry which is materialism and there has been a retreat from family values and a change in attitudes towards sexuality. We are criticised for being old fashioned, out of touch. Explore that more precisely with people who say this, and it will be the church's attitude towards sex, marriage and family life that they have a problem with. What Christians say doesn't reflect modern attitudes to cohabitation, family life and sexuality, or so we are told, and this keeps people, particularly the younger generation away from the Christian faith.

How do God's people respond to this? One way is to bend towards the world and reflect modern culture. In one sense there's nothing wrong with this. The Christian faith moulds

to every culture because if we want to communicate the gospel to people we need to be able to connect with our generation. But there's a world of difference between style of worship and fundamental principles of God's word.

How far do we go before we commit the sins of some at Pergamum? The thin end of the wedge is the Balaamite view. Yes, as God's people we should be part of the world, but when we bend our values and morality to fit in, then we place ourselves in danger as folk in Pergamum did. And that applies across all issues of life.

Worse we might end up as the Nicolaitans. It worries me when Christians come up with a Biblical theology justifying something that in 20 centuries Christians across all kinds of denominations, have never suggested or adopted. That's why I can't agree on Steve Chalke's theology on same-sex marriage. He's been an inspirational Christian leader over the past couple of decades, but he's taken a step too far.

One of the measures we have always used to evaluate any change in our approach to moral issues is how it can be justified in Scripture. Something may be well-argued from the Bible, but how have Christians of all persuasions understood it down the centuries. How was it understood when the scripture was first written. If any Christian idea or practice can't be traced right back to origin, then alarm bells should ring. It's why Church History is taught in theological colleges. We need to know where something is coming from.

I say all this because one way in which Christians have suggested we make ourselves more acceptable to the world is by seeing which way in which we should bend to the world in order to make ourselves more inclusive to a wider population. My response to this is take great care when going down this road. It's not a matter of law, it is a matter of grace. In accepting something less than what God wants for us will rob us of the blessings God wants to pour on us.

VERSE

But the consequences of getting it wrong are not good. Here's what we read. *Now turn from your sins! If you don't, I will come to you soon and fight against those people with the sword that comes out of my mouth.*

Jesus doesn't say he's going to deal with the church as a whole, just the people who hold to error. And it's going to be something He speaks truth into. One of the greatest characteristics of liberal theology is that it doesn't have much appeal and churches who hold to it don't thrive.

Which therefore begs a question. How should we deal with the fact that church, certainly church in Felixstowe, is no longer connecting to the younger generation?

What we do know is that there are an increasing number of churches in other places that are growing that are burgeoning with young people and families. How have they managed it? I decided to take a look at a few of the fastest growing churches and see what we can learn from them.

Firstly the vast majority of these churches are in the charismatic and pentecostal persuasion, but not exclusively so – they are certainly evangelical. They welcome all – just as Jesus did (if you remember my sermon from last week).

I must say their worship is usually contemporary as befits their generation, but what's most dominant is that they promote a faith that is active in people's lives. Faith is about connecting with the God who connected with us in Christ. It's about heaven, glory, power, presence. Faith is something you live and experience. Don't think the younger generation is atheistic. Quite the reverse. There is a real interest in spiritual things. Never water the gospel down, it's the real deal – people are looking for something that is real and never lack confidence in presenting it that way.

But then look at the theology of these churches. They are all very conservative in what they teach about life and sexuality. They have changed the packaging, but the content remains the same. Holiness is an important part of their teaching. Being a Christian is about allowing ourselves to be changed and shaped by God to become more like Jesus. That's costly.

Actually this approach reflects what Jesus taught in the passage from Matthew we looked at last week. We accept all, never condone sin, but teach the importance of following Jesus, whatever the cost. Actually in a world where people have a history of broken lives, broken relationships, the healing that comes through trusting and following Jesus and the coherence of the Christian faith makes sense. Personal experience. There's nothing wrong with 20 centuries of the Christian faith – we just need to have confidence that it actually works and God really changes lives.

Actually walking in obedience to Christ costly for each of us in one way or another. There are things we want to hold on to. Ways of living, ways of thinking that we like. But God wants to pour out His blessings on us. Maybe you know that there is something in your life that's just not right this morning. Something you've held on to and justified to yourself that it's OK for years. Maybe it will be costly for you to stop but you know Jesus is calling you to stop making excuses and live in obedience to Him. Ask the Spirit of God to give you the power to deal with that today.

Most of us here have been Christians long enough to know that when we walk in obedience to Jesus, things happen. This is the promise of this passage: *17 "If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches! "To those who win the victory I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give each of them a white stone on which is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.*

There are two blessings here. One is growth – we have a God who feeds us, makes us strong, brings us closer to Him and allows us to live as we should, in victory. The white stone? It was a prize given when people completed a race. The prize God gives us is an assurance that what we have isn't just for now but for eternity.

Our faith is a power faith. It's a faith based on the person of Jesus Christ. It's a faith that brings us into relationship with the living God. It is a faith that gives us a structure for living that makes sense and allows us to experience all the blessings of God. I'll finished where I started last week. The Christian faith is about behavioural alteration. It's about changed lives, healed lives, hope-filled lives. It's about God changing lives. Never change that message.