

To stand apart from the crowd has always been a dangerous business. In Australia we have a name for people who stand out. We call them tall poppies. No-one likes a tall poppy. A tall poppy has achieved in some area or has decided to live differently in one area and the rest of us look to tall poppies with a mixture of envy and dislike. And the one thing Australians are good at is cutting tall poppies down to size.

I've noticed a very similar culture here in Britain. Here there is a whole newspaper industry which it seems is devoted to cutting people down to size. One false move and the media will pounce on tall poppies.

I don't think this is a peculiarly British or Australian thing, it's universal. No-one likes someone who thinks that *they* are a bit different.

Now this kind of tall poppy culture – creates a big problem for Christians. We don't just eat differently, we live our whole lives differently. Jesus tells his followers in the Sermon on the Mount to "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds." Christians are supposed to live radically different lives that get seen by a watching world. The world is supposed to look at Christians and say – "these people are thinking and living Very differently." **And this is always going to lead to persecution.**

[SLIDE – The Issue. Stand out => be persecuted]

If you stand out – you will be persecuted. The church in Pergamum have learnt this fact at great cost. Here in verse 13 the church has made at least one major stand against the culture of the day – Antipas, one of their number, has died rather than deny Jesus. And Jesus commends the whole church here. Not only did *Antipas* prove faithful to the point of death, the whole church drew a line in the sand and did not buckle even when martyrdom was knocking at the door.

Jesus commends the church of Pergamum for standing out – even to the point of terrific persecution. And it's not just physical persecution they're facing but spiritual. Do you see how Jesus describes Pergamum, verse 13:

"I know where you live – where Satan has his throne."

And then again at the end of the verse, Jesus speaks of Pergamum as the place "where Satan lives."

There is a concentrated spiritual attack here in Pergamum. We learnt last week, when we looked at the church in Smyrna, that behind all the *human* opposition which Christians face, stands the devil. Here in Pergamum, Jesus reminds us that in the midst of the martyrdom of Antipas, Satan is working. Satan lives in Pergamum. He has his throne there.

Do you ever wonder where the devil is? Do you ever wonder what he does, how he spends his time? Where would be a good place for the devil to base himself?

Well verses like this one remind us that Satan does not have his throne out in the pagan world orchestrating orgies and heavy metal rock concerts. That would be such a waste of his time! The devil's throne is not in Las Vegas (or whatever the ancient world's equivalent) – the devil's throne is here in Pergamum, among Christians. Satan is not interested in getting people to bite the heads off chickens. He is Very interested in destroying the church.

And how does he do it here in Pergamum? Well opposition from outside the church seems to have failed. The persecution from without has met the faithful witness of Anitpas and he's held to Christ even to the point of death. But that's not the only way to destroy a church. Satan not only works from outside – he also works from *inside* a church. We'll see him do that in verses 14 and 15.

You might have read those verses first time around and thought – what is that all about? Well let's see if we can understand what's going on – read with me from verse 14:

“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.”

So this church has survived the attack from outside – Here Christ tells them the danger from within. Within the church at Pergamum – there are people doing what Balaam and Balak did. And it seems that the Nicolaitans, are doing much the same thing given that they are lumped in with Balaam and Balak. So the question to ask is – who are Balaam and Balak and what did they do?

Well you can read about these men in the Old Testament book of Numbers from chapter 22 – 31. Balak was the king of Moab – he hated the Israelites and wanted to get rid of them. So King Balak employed a prophet called Balaam to pronounce a prophet's curse on the Israelites.

But Balaam never actually curses the Israelites because he keeps hearing from the LORD that he mustn't. So he's getting paid by the king to pronounce a curse but because the LORD tells him not to – he pronounces only blessings.

Anyway to cut a long story short, Balaam soon gives up on opposing them from outside. Instead, Balaam tries to change them from within. He does this by sending in a whole swathe of good looking women to the Israelite's camp. Large numbers of the men are all too quickly seduced and they have sex with the Moabite women. So the Israelites, who had prided themselves on being so distinct from the nations, end up in bed with the Moabite women, who then invited the Israelites to worship their gods. And so many Israelites end up extremely

compromised in sexual immorality, in idol worship and in eating that food which was sacrificed to Moab's gods. It goes without saying that the LORD was Not happy.

But do you see the tactic? Balaam turned the Israelites away from God, not through opposition from outside, but through infiltrating them from within. He simply appealed to the worldly fleshly appetites of the Israelites and it worked. Very soon Israel was behaving just like the surrounding nations.

So that's the alternative to standing out and being compromised. **When persecution comes it is very easy to blend in and be compromised.**

[SLIDE – Blend in => be compromised]

Here in Pergamum members of the *church* held to Balaam's teaching. In other words there was a group within the church who thought sexual immorality was ok. (Not to mention idol worship and the eating of food sacrificed to idols). And these people didn't just *think* such immorality was ok – they taught that it was ok, within a church setting.

What a familiar issue in the history of the church! It was an issue in Balaam's day. It was an issue in the days of Pergamum and it is an issue today.

Today our greatest threat is from within the church. No-one in this country is going to drag us off to prison for being Christian. Our enemy is not outside – it's inside. The great danger for our church is the people within it who teach lies about God's standards for sex and marriage. God is clear in Scripture that the only place for sex is in a married relationship between a man and a woman – but many oppose this teaching.

This is the issue at the center of massive debate especially within the church of England at the moment. If you're new to Christian things and find all this a bit perplexing, that's fine. Christ is addressing His church here – if you're not a believer yet, then this isn't so much for you. There's probably many more pressing things for you to think through in terms of Christ's teaching and we'd be glad to talk any of those through with you. But if you would call yourself a Christian then you're in the church and you share a church in which, like in Pergamum's day, there is false teaching.

And this is serious – not just for *them*, because *they* are teaching error – but it's serious for us because we have let them. Do you see that in verse 16:

Christ tells the faithful Christians in Pergamum “Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to *you* and will fight against *them* with the sword of my mouth.”

Do you see what Jesus says? He says to the faithful Christians to “repent” even though it is clearly the false teachers who are in the wrong. Why does he tell the faithful Christians to Repent? He does it because it is not simply wrong to *teach* lies about God – it is also wrong to stand by while others teach those lies.

That has been the really challenging thing for me this week, preparing the sermon. Christ warns us that we must not tolerate false teaching. If there are people telling lies within the church then WE must do something. VERY challenging. Especially when this issue seems to be so clear that even a non-Christian can write on it with disturbing clarity.

Matthew Parris in last Saturdays Times wrote this:

Quote

What a rebuke! How refreshing to see the issue put so clearly. If God has spoken then we stand by that, no matter what the world may say. Christians must stand out and take the criticism that the world will throw. We cannot blend in and be compromised or else we make a mockery of God’s Word.

Well that’s the issue – there is false teaching within the church – and we must not tolerate it. But how do we go about opposing it? **Well Jesus gives us some clues as we look at the original source of the letter and our final destination.**

[SLIDE – glasses]

First let’s look at the description of Christ. **Here in v12 He’s described as having the sharp, double edged sword.**

[SLIDE – The sword]

In verse 16 we see that it is the sword of His mouth. What comes out of Jesus’ mouth is the sharp, double edged sword. There is a very close connection between the sword and the words of Jesus. This is because the sword is a common description in Scripture for the Bible. In Ephesians chapter 6, the Bible is described as a sword. In Hebrews 4, the writer says:

“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

That’s what the Bible is – it is a sharp double edged sword. And given that Jesus uses the double edged sword against false teachers it seems like we also ought to stand up to them like Jesus. If He uses the double-edged sword – we must use it. So the first clue as to how we should fight against false teachers is by using the Bible.

We must get to grips with the Bible. We must be certain in ourselves of what it says. We must learn how to use our weapon. Only then will we be able to take our stand on God's truth and resist the forces of compromise.

Do you know how to spot a fake? The Federal Reserve in the US runs courses for people who want to spot counterfeit money. You can sign up to a week long course to discover how to immediately recognize counterfeits. Do you know how they spend their time? The first four days they don't even look at a counterfeit bill. They simply study the original. Once they know every pattern and contour of the genuine article then they can spot the fake immediately.

It's the same in the church. If we're going to stand up for God's truth in the midst of compromising influences – then we must know the truth – we must get to grips with the Bible.

But that's only part of the solution. There's more going on in false teaching than just misreading the Bible. No-one wakes up one morning and thinks – "I'm going to be a false teacher." People fall in with a bad crowd for a reason.

We went out onto the streets to ask people if they'd ever fallen in with the wrong crowd. Pretty much all of them said that they had, which goes to show how difficult it is to stand out. **So we asked them why they went with the wrong crowd? Here are some of their responses...**

[VIDEO – Have you ever fallen in with the wrong crowd?]

Why do people go along with the bad crowd? Most of them said "because it looks like fun."

Jesus knows this. And so as He finishes His letter He tells the church at Pergamum that however much fun the false teachers look like they're having, *He's* providing even more satisfaction. **Jesus, in verse 17 promises a final destination of life in abundance.**

[SLIDE – Life in abundance]

Read with me verse 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.

This seems like a very odd thing to say but I hope I can show you that these rewards are life in abundance – much better than anything the world can offer.

Let's look at these two gifts Christ promises – the hidden manna and the white stone.

Firstly – the hidden manna. Manna was the food which the LORD provided for the Israelites in the desert all those years ago under Moses. It is described in Psalm 78 as the bread of angels – it was an amazing provision of God to a hungry people. Do you see why it's so appropriate that Christ offers us this bread of heaven? The fun that the false teachers are offering in Pergamum was all about gratifying the flesh. This bad crowd is all about satisfying earthly, fleshly appetites.

But Christ doesn't tell us to forget about our appetite. He doesn't tell us that the bad crowd has more fun but Christians shouldn't have fun. Jesus tells us that the Christian should set their desires on something far more satisfying. The false teachers will sell you short. Jesus says "Don't fill up on earthly, fleshly, temporary food. Feast on the truly satisfying spiritual food."

So that's the manna – what about this white stone with a new name written on it?

Well the giving of a name is very important in the Bible. A name signifies the *identity* of someone. It's more than just a label to differentiate people – it sums up your character. So here the promise is that Christ will give to the believer a new name. And we'll receive this new name and say "That is exactly who I am. That is my new identity in Christ."

This promise would be very precious to Christians who are struggling to remain distinct from the world. Their earthly names will have been dragged through the mud as they stand out in the world. Here though, they have a secure identity, but also a secure intimacy.

This is a very intimate thing in verse 17. Here Christ is promising to let us know His pet name for us. Did you realize that Christ has a name for you that's just between you and Him? What an amazing thought!

Sometimes I catch myself thinking that Christ doesn't especially love me. Have you ever thought that? Maybe Jesus does love me, but so what – He loves everyone equally – I'm not special.

Well let me recommend to you that you meditate on verse 17. Jesus has a special name that fits you like a glove. And it's His pet name for you that no-one else but you and He are allowed to know. That is intimate.

Maybe we have some married couples here that have a pet name for each other that no-one else knows. It's a very intimate thing. And it's exactly what Jesus feels for us. He doesn't just know you by name – He's got His own pet name for you and one day He'll share it with you and you alone.

To a church struggling against sexual sin – this promise of intimacy with Christ would have been extremely important. (Because) At the heart of sexual promiscuity is usually the desire for intimacy. It's a misplaced desire for intimacy that leads so many to the bedroom. But again

Christ offers so much more than these tawdry pleasures. He offers intimate relationship with Himself – the Lord of the Universe.

If we're going to teach and hold onto this truth that sex is only for marriage between a man and a woman then we need to also say to our homosexual brothers and sisters and to our single brothers and sisters – Christ is enough. Intimacy with Him is the answer to your deepest longings and not sex. We need to stand by our homosexual and our single friends and care for them and encourage them at every turn to make this very hard decision to forsake the fleeting fun that this world and the false teachers will offer. But we need to do so by telling them that there is so much more to be had in Christ.

As I close, the world and the devil will try to pull the church down from outside. False teachers will try to get the church to compromise from within. If we are going to resist this pull we must stand on the Bible. We must learn from it, learn how to handle it, we must meditate on it, speak it to one another, live by it and **delight in it**. As we've seen this morning we don't tell people to obey Christ in *spite* of their desire for pleasure. We tell people to obey *because* of their desire for pleasure! If we truly believe that ultimate satisfaction, identity and intimacy come from Christ then our call to renounce the world and cling to Christ is not a call to renounce pleasure but to find it.

Let us joyfully return to the Bible as our standard of truth, and let us delight in it.

To reflect on these things, let's hear from Psalm 119 how delighting in the Bible is the way we can make our stand in a compromised world.