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Scripture: A Message to the Church-Pegramum

In this great, massive, diverse, world of ours, where we are all so very different, we have one thing in common, we find ourselves here at the same time, at North Park Community Church. If I look closely enough, I can see you coming in to church today- there you are walking across the parking lot, look how well you are dressed today and how slim you look these days..... sorry, that's me... ☺

I am not sure if you are like me- but I like to travel. But unfortunately, I don't have a massive travel budget, so I do most of my travel through google earth. The flights are cheap, and short, and I've only experienced turbulence like a few times, so it is my preferred method of travel. So today, I want you to travel with me, I've booked your seats, you're sitting in them. There are no seat belts, so just hold on tightly to the person next to you- but only if you know them.

Today we are going to a city named Bergama, it's in western Turkey. It's actually 8 hrs ahead, so if you're feeling a little groggy from the jet lag, just grab a sip of caffeine and stay focused here ☺

Bergama is a beautiful city, today it has a population of a little less than 100,000. This modern day city, which is known for its carpet production, was once actually a very ancient city that was known for much more, than carpets. Bergama is also known by its ancient name, Pergamum, which is where the church was located that Jesus speaks to by letter in Revelation 2- the letter to the church we are going to look at together today.

This ancient city was, and is nestled in the shadow of this super-imposing mountain. In the town of Pergamum, at the foot of the mountain, was where the "day to day life" of the city of Pergamum took place. But, the spiritual life of this city, which really affected everything, was controlled from on top of this mountain.

The top of this mountain is where all of the religious life of this city played out. On top of this mountain, overlooking Pergamum, there was an outdoor amphitheatre, sloped down the side of the mountain- 80 rows all the way to the bottom consisting of these very tall steps, with the highest situated about 36 meters above the orchestra pit; it could seat 10,000 spectators. This was a place where many religious teachings about Pergamum's many gods would have taken place.

Pergamum was world renowned for its library. A 200,000 volume library existed here which was a Phenom in the known world at that time. *A library is a building where one could actually go, and books would be present. You would actually walk up and down the rows to find your book ☺* this was an educated city. As a matter of fact, the name Pergamum comes from the word "parchment", which is connected to the parchment they produced to write books on. There was no google books or e-books.

Right next to this 10,000 seat theatre, was the temple of Dionysius. Dionysius, was the god of wine, ecstatic revelry (aka. sexual promiscuity) and god of the theatre (hence the temple being located next to the theatre). Dionysius was super important, because he was believed to be a son to the King god, Zeus.

Also on top of this mountain, was the temple of Athena, The temple of Athena Polias Nikephoros (Athena of the City, Bringer of Victory), which stood directly behind and above the 10,000 seat theatre, was one of the oldest religious centers of Pergamum and one of the most important, because she was daughter to the King god, Zeus

Also, this mountain was known for its temple to Roman Caesar worship. Here is the Trajan temple, which was named for a Roman emperor that the

people were to revere as god. Pergamum was the first city in Asia minor to build temples to living Roman leaders that everyone must worship and give homage to as if giving homage to god.

And if that is not enough, if there were altars to the son of Zeus, and the daughters of Zeus, then there was the altar to the main god, the superior god, the most powerful god, the supposed king of all gods- Zeus himself. As the city had Greek influence before the Romans ruled during this period of Jesus, the altar to the Greek God Zeus stood large and imposing overlooking the city of Pergamum. Zeus was often revered as the god to whom all other gods bowed. His chief symbol of power was the thunderbolt, and he was often depicted in a pose where he was striding forward with a thunderbolt in his right hand. Throughout history, Zeus has been depicted as using extreme violence to get his way and terrorizing humans. As god of the sky he supposedly had the power to hurl lightning bolts as a weapon. Since lightning is quite powerful and sometimes deadly, it was a bold sign when lightning would strike because it was believed that Zeus most likely threw the bolt. Zeus was to be feared...and everyone living underneath him in the city knew.....he was always watching over them.....always.

Then, in the midst of all these false gods and crazy societal pressures, there was a little church- a group of Christians. What would Jesus have to say to a church that existed in a city like this? What do you think Jesus would want to say to the church living underneath the nostrils of Zeus? Jesus does have a message for this church, and things might not always be as they seem...

Revelation 2: 12-13a

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

It is amazing how every word in Revelation has deep symbolism and how every phrase is packed with nuance and there are so many different ways of possibly understanding this.

The definitive weapon the Romans used to enforce their laws was a short, double edged sword known as a gladius. It could slash, it could thrust, it could block. It was a versatile weapon that helped the

Roman military become one of the most formidable in the world. The double-edged sword was the primary symbol of Roman authority.

Then Jesus says to this church, “don’t fear the Roman sword, my sword is truly a double-edged sword that is to be feared”, and it is probably no coincidence that the bible, the scriptures, the word of God, is described as “sharp as any double-edged sword”. Jesus is simply saying to this church- “*don’t fear the sword of the Romans, it has no authority over you. My sword, my word, has ultimate authority- if there is a sword that you are to be aware of, it is my sword, my word*”, says Jesus.

Then he follows up with this, “*I know where you live...*” And this is not like a “Mobster threat”, “I know where you live”- this is a statement about where the church is positioned in this city. I know where you live church, “where Satan has his throne”. A city where Satan has his throne- not the slogan most cities want on their welcome signs....but remember what’s happening at Pergamum’s peak. Remember what is overlooking this city...

There’s a temple for the emperor....worship the Caesar as a god.

There’s a temple for Dionysius, god of wine, and sexual escapades, son of Zeus.

There’s a temple for Athena Nikephoros, goddess of victory and daughter of Zeus.

There’s a temple for Zeus, god of sky and thunder and god of the pantheon of all gods. So yeah, this is not just a place where Satan has influence, this a place where Satan sits and rules. Jesus says, “*I know where you are church, you’re in a challenging place, the place where Satan rules...the place where Satan has his throne...*”

In light of all this, pressure on every side, Roman gods, Greek gods, unknown gods- in light of being surrounded and saturated with all of this, Jesus gives them a word of praise that he might not be able to give some churches who lived in this culture....

Yet you remain true to my name.

Yet, in spite of, even though, despite all of these foreign gods breathing down your neck, you stayed true to me, you held fast to me, you did not trade me in for one of these worthless idols. You held to my name and held to your faith. “What would you do?” “What would I do?” “What would the North American church do?” “What would the Canadian church do?” In light of all this pressure, they stuck true to Jesus.

And, just to make sure that that history knows how tough it was to be a Jesus-follower in Pergamum, then we hear these words, “*You stuck true to me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city- where Satan lives*”.

Not much is said in the bible about this guy Antipas. We get pretty much to the end of the book, and here his name appears. And it isn't a casual mention. It's a heavyweight mention. This guy wasn't just any Christian or any Christian leader. We are told point blank, by Jesus himself, that when the heat of cultural pressure was on the church, Antipas was killed for sticking true to his convictions as a Jesus follower. He wouldn't bow to the Roman god of the emperor, he wouldn't bow to the Greek god Dionysius or his Greek god sister Athena or their father, the god of all gods, Zeus. No way, he was sticking with Jesus!

The bible doesn't tell us, but church historical accounts suggest that Antipas was likely the pastor of this Pergamese church, or maybe even a local bishop. These accounts also suggest he likely refused to worship the living Roman Emperor, and his death came to pass by being stuffed inside a red-hot copper bull and being burned alive.

Living for Jesus in the city where Satan had this throne, cost something. In many parts of the world today, living for Jesus costs something. Antipas was amongst one of the firsts to discover this and to become a faithful witness for Jesus.

This church, had stood the test and held true, or had they? Things in this book, aren't always as they seem. Jesus has more to say here...

“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate

food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.¹⁵ Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans”.

When your wife/husband says, “I have something to talk to you about”, you may listen, you may not. When your pastor says, “I have something to talk to you about”, you may listen or just find a new church, but when Jesus says, “I have a few things to talk to you about...” it's time to tune in.

This church, was seemingly doing the big things right. No compromising the gospel- Jesus is God. They held fast that Dionysius was not god, and Athena was not god, and the Roman emperor was not god, and Zeus was NOT god. But, they had this Balaam teaching happening amongst them, and this Nicolaitan thing, one of which we are going to talk about...the Balaam thing.

The Balaam thing that this church was tolerating comes from a passage in the bible, specifically Numbers 22-24. A guy named Balak, who was an enemy of God, asked a prophet named Balaam, to put a curse on God's people. Balaam, tried to do this, and was unsuccessful. So he eventually tells Balak, the most effective way to weaken Israel was through seduction, using Moabite and Midianite women to tempt the Israelites into sexual relationships and into pagan rituals. Of course, the Israelites eventually fall for this, and through their sexual relationships and pagan rituals, they eventually, slowly, gradually begin to worship false gods, and the true God of Israel judges them for it.

So, the teaching of Balaam, is compromising one's faith in God, “the slow and seductive way”. This prophet, Balaam, knew it was a futile exercise, it was a waste of his time, to try and get Israel to worship another god just by saying, “forsake God, worship these “small gods”. The people were tricked, slowly seduced, over time, through cultural acts, to worship other gods, and then the God of Israel, judged them for it.

The same was proving true in Pergamum. The Jesus followers of the day that fell away from following Jesus, they just didn't fall away in one day when someone stood up and said, “worship the gods on this mountain...” Dionysius, to worship Athena, to worship Zeus. It happened as they slowly adopted

the religious norms of the city, over months, and years, and then, it happened...they were worshipping at the feet of Zeus, unexpected....slow creep..... And it's amazing what the slow creep does over time. In this city/Pergamum today, the Christian witness of the gospel is seemingly very minimal- the gospel did not take a rich, deep hold in this city- slow creep....over time.....big impact.

So, where this passage is leaning, is quite obvious right? A core component of being a follower of Jesus, is not compromising the gospel, but here is the piece I want to add...How do we live for Jesus in a way that doesn't compromise the gospel but still allows us to engage our city in a way where 100 years from now, the gospel is strong because we didn't compromise and bow to the gods of culture but we made ongoing effort to be a part of this city that we call home- the city of London. I think that Jesus says a similar thing to us that he said to Pergamum:

I know where you are church, I know where you live, you're in a challenging place in history...

Just like Jesus understood Pergamum, Jesus understands London. He gets the city, and he loves the city. He loves the church in the city, and he loves the eclectic, diverse, heartbeat of this city. He knows how important the city is, and we need to be reminded how important the city is.

I heard a phrase at a seminar I was at this Friday that said, "*As goes the city, so goes the culture...*" It was true in the city of Pergamum, and it is true today, in the city of London. Cities are the vibrant, living hubs of cultures, religions, diversity, and God needs us to remember two postures towards the city, and I want to take my last few moments to try and help us as we learn from Revelation 2.

How does a church, inside a city, exist and influence the city? Notice I did not say exist and isolate itself, I said exist and influence the city.

Keeping in mind, "*as goes the city, so goes the culture*", I want to say two things,

- I. We don't compromise the gospel **BUT**
- II. We do captivate people with grace.

The gospel has what I want to call "foundational" and "fluid" areas. "Foundational" areas are clear areas where a family of faith cannot betray its belief and values. Period.

Last summer, the Canadian Federal Government changed the online application form by which summer student grants were given. Many faith groups, including ours, have availed of these grants for years. There was a box on the application that applicants had to check that basically asked each applicant to waive their religious views or religious expression with regards to reproductive rights and abortion. Because this faith community views the sanctity of human life as a core component of our understanding of God, we engaged the Member of Parliament, had a respectful conversation, let our voice be heard in culture, and then refused to submit the application. In these days, in this city, in every city, the church cannot simply compromise, whether quickly or slowly, with the essentials of the gospel.

But, I also believe, we cannot leave it there. It is not true to the gospel nor to the ministry of Jesus to build walls around ourselves around our essentials and isolate ourselves from culture, from the city. We are called, expressly, to not compromise the essentials of the gospel, but to "captivate people with grace." At North Park, we hold grace as one of our core values- stated specifically, "Embracing each other, regardless of life situation or brokenness as we journey towards Life Transformation."

One of my other hats as of late, is site pastor at a church plant. In doing so, I am learning, that grace is the only thing that attracts people to Jesus. Our rules don't, our laws don't, our traditions don't, the grace of Jesus that lives in the fluid areas, does.

I reflect a lot lately on what the apostle Paul said, the chief Christian missionary, "*I have become all things to all people so that by all means possible I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel...*"

I'm learning I have to make room for a lot more fluid areas these days. I am learning that grace is much messier than I had ever thought. I am learning that as long as I keep my foundationals straight- "Jesus is the only way", then learning to be more open in the fluid areas will keep me relevant in the city.

Many matters of doctrine, are “fluid” areas that we have made “foundational” areas. “What do we do, to make it easy for people to come to God? What must we do, what did Jesus have to do, what fluid areas were going on in your life, when Jesus accepted you?”

If you are going to be the neighbor in this city that God called you to be, if you are going to be the person in the workforce in this city that God has called you to be, if you are going to be the person of gospel influence in this city that God calls you to be, he is calling you to hold to the foundationals, and let him work through the fluid areas.

This weekend, you are here and you are trying to figure out this whole Jesus thing, and you are saying, “*if I want to come to Jesus, but I have issues with abuse, I’ve got issues with drugs, I’ve got issues surrounding sexuality, I’ve got major marriage issues, I’ve got issues around gender, I’ve got problems around addictions, can I fit? What are the foundational of this for me- can I be accepted? Will the church of the city accept me? Will the Jesus followers of the city accept me? Will the Jesus of the city accept me?*”

Foundational- For if you tell others with your own mouth that Jesus Christ is your Lord and believe in your own heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. The rest, are mainly fluids.

Church- in our city, let’s hold Jesus high, with our life. Church in our city, let God work through the fluid areas. We are called to live in our city with grace and truth. Let’s do that in our workplaces and neighbourhoods and watch what God will do.

Amen? Amen.

Let’s pray.

Points to Ponder

A Message to the Church

Things are not always as they seem

Letter to Pergamum

A Journey into Cultural Compromise

Revelation 2

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. The church in Pergamum was under “great pressure” to worship foreign gods. Have you ever experienced pressure or persecution to leave your faith in Jesus for belief in something/someone else?
2. Compromise often doesn’t happen quickly, but slowly over time. Can you recall a time in your life, or in your Christian journey, where you compromised negatively in a way that you didn’t see coming? How did that make you feel? How did you “come back” from it? Have you “come back” from it?
3. Can you recall a time in your life where a small, negative compromise ended up causing you to make a much larger compromise?
4. How can Christians be “non-compromising” with the truth of the gospel, yet still find way to “captive people with grace”?
5. Discuss some ways to re-establish your first love with Jesus.