

The Struggle to Be Distinct
Revelation 2:12-17
#4 in a Series from the Book of Revelation
Faith Community Church, August 5, 2007

Introduction

When I finished school I served in a church in northern New Jersey. In the church was a man who was nice-enough, but he was *different*.

On Easter Sunday he would say “Merry Christmas,” and on Christmas he would say, “Happy Easter.” His normal greeting on Sunday morning was “Good evening,” and at night he would say (you guessed it) – “Good morning.”

He wasn’t necessarily argumentative, but he did seem to enjoy playing devil’s advocate or taking a different position on some non-essential points of doctrine.

One good thing about this man was that he seemed to be active in sharing his faith. But even here he marched to a different drummer. In fact I can remember him telling me about a time when he and a Christian co-worker paid a prostitute who had solicited them so that they could talk to her about her need for Christ. Like I said, he was different.

He was a someone you could love as a brother in Christ, but in all honesty, he was not the easiest guy to be around.

Are you different? I fear that when we talk about living a different life – being distinct, or perhaps distinctive – that we associate that kind of “being different” with what the Bible talks about. But it’s not.

The section that we’ll look at this morning is directed to a church that was doing some very good things, but whose members were gradually becoming more and more like the culture around them so that there was no sense of being different in the way the Bible speaks of being different. So let’s read Revelation 2:12-17 and see what Jesus says to them.

What Jesus Said to the Church at Pergamum

1. They were to be praised for being faithful in spite of persecution (2:13).
 - a. What draws our attention immediately is Jesus saying that he knows where they live – where Satan has his throne.
 - b. To what is Jesus referring?
 - i. Like Smyrna (2:8-11), Pergamum had a large temple built in honor to the Emperor.
 - ii. And like Christians in Smyrna, these Christians faced the same constant pressure to renounce Christ as their king and master and acknowledge Caesar instead.

- iii. To not take part in this oath of allegiance was to be liable to the charge of being unpatriotic or a traitor. Christians in the early centuries were sometimes viewed as insurrectionists. And that is not surprising, since Jesus himself was accused of that (see John 19:12-15).
 - iv. We can't lose sight of or minimize what this whole issue of emperor worship meant to these people. Suppose that when you went to vote each year, you were asked to renounce your allegiance to any other authority than the government. Suppose it was understood that if you wanted to be a Christian, that was fine as long as your beliefs and loyalty to Christ came second to your obedience to the state. And suppose that your standing in the community, your ability to get a job, buy and sell, find housing, live in peace all depended on your public statement of allegiance. What would you do?
 - v. Their faithfulness to God led to persecution from the Roman authorities, and there was no greater persecutor of the church in the early centuries than the Roman government. Because of its relationship to Rome and its persecution of the church, Pergamum earns the title as the place where "Satan has his throne."
 - c. In spite of the persistent pressure, the church in Pergamum had stood strong, even at a time when one of their number – a man named Antipas of whom we know nothing else – was put to death. And it is for this faithfulness that Christ commends them.
2. They were in danger because of their failure to watch out for inward corruption.
- a. Jesus identifies a problem – while circling the wagons against outward pressure to deny Christ, they had allowed a problem to develop within and were doing nothing to correct it. Let's look at what is happening (2:14-15).
 - b. What is Jesus talking about here?
 - i. His words identify a group of people (possibly two similar groups) who are compared to Balaam, a false prophet whose story is told in Numbers 22-25. In short, Balaam had been hired by Balak – the king of the Moabite people – to curse Israel. But each time Balaam attempted to issue a curse against them, God caused words of blessing to come from his mouth. Finally Balaam tells Balak that he knows how to bring harm to Israel. If they will invite the people of Israel to participate in their idol worship (which involved sexual immorality), God himself would judge them. And that is what happened.
 - ii. While the person of Balaam becomes synonymous with people who were greedy, the teaching of Balaam becomes synonymous with moral compromise. And that is what was happening in Pergamum – there were people who were advocating/promoting moral compromise.
 - iii. What form did this take? Jesus' words don't give us details. We could connect this to the demands of the trade guilds (to which many belonged as a part of their occupation) which held dinners in honor of pagan deities and were little more than orgies. They couldn't take your life the way the government could, but they could make it

miserable if you chose not to worship the god or goddess of the guild. It could be that there were some who said, “It’s not big deal.” Or it could have been the result of the common teaching that our continuing to sin made God look good because it gave him more to forgive. Regardless of the method, the result was that there were some in the church who were advocating moral compromise as perfectly acceptable and no doubt were causing people in the church to stumble into sin. And nothing was being done about it.

- iv. This ought to make us scratch our heads a bit. After all, here is a church standing firm against the worship of the emperor because of loyalty to Christ, while at the same time allowing some of its people to live in moral failure. This is probably a bad analogy, but isn’t it somewhat like being fully committed to intense exercise each day, but then only eating Twinkies. It doesn’t make sense – unless of course you realize that they were no different than we are. We are all good at avoiding some sins while tolerating the presence of others.
- c. Because of the impact that this has on the church, Jesus calls them to repentance – to change what they think and how they behave. He is warning them to take care of this matter or he promises that he will do it – and soon. He then issues the same kind of closing as other letters, promising that the one who obeys/overcomes/conquers will be rewarded. The white stone probably refers to a token that was given for admission into the trade dinners, and the point behind the entire promise is to contrast the passing pleasure of these activities in light of the fellowship with Christ at his table in heaven.

How Do We Apply What Jesus Says to the Church at Pergamum?

I’m not aware of an exact modern parallel to this situation. It is rare to hear about a church in which someone is teaching what is wrong and not being corrected. That happens in the broader context of the church (i.e. just turn on your TV), but I’ve never heard of it happening and not being dealt with. But this letter certainly speaks to the issue of the quality of our spiritual lives. So out of Christ’s words to the church I would like to focus on two points of application:

1. We need to see Christ’s desire for a pure church.
 - a. Scripture – Ephesians 1:3-4, 5:23-27; Philippians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:21-22; 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, 5:23; Jude 24.
 - b. The fact that this idea is repeated as often as it is shows that this is something important!
 - c. What does it mean to be blameless? The word means to be without blemish in character and conduct. That’s a tall order, but it is what Christ calls the church to.
 - d. Being blameless – without blemish in character and conduct – is something that the culture around us is not. And that is what it means to be different. It is not some vague or undefined concept. When Peter talks about it in his first letter, he uses the words “sojourner” (or stranger) and “exile” – word that

describe our relationship to this world. And on the basis of the fact that we're not children of this world – children of this culture – he appeals to us to be sure that we are not living like the culture around us. Which brings us to the second point of application:

2. We need to continually examine our relationship to our culture.
 - a. It is important for us to grasp that our standard of conduct needs to be determined by the unchanging standard of Scripture, and not by the shifting standards of our culture.
 - b. We also need to grasp the fact that biblical morality and character are not a matter of living a notch better than the people around us, but of conforming to the image of Christ.
 - c. The question for us to ask is this: what is it that shapes our behavior and attitudes? But I wonder if we really ever answer that question in anything more than a superficial way. How does Christ affect the way you dress, the way you spend your money, the attitudes that you have toward people, your sexual conduct, how you judge what you read, see, hear? You simply cannot answer those questions in a 30-second inspection. Yet they are essential if we are going to be followers of Christ, not just admirers of what he did for us.

Closing

Becoming a Christian is relatively easy. God brings new life when you repent of your sin and place your faith in Christ as Savior. But living as a Christian is something else. If we think it's easy, it's because we're not involved in the struggle. So let's check our hearts so that we are pleasing to God, so that our church is pleasing to God, and so that we bring him the glory that he deserves.