

Beware creeping compromise of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] Hi guys, we're going to continue reading from Revelation chapter 2, starting at verse 12.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is, yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore, repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.

[1 : 30] Muted.

We can't pee, Dave, you need to unmute yourself. okay hopefully that's better this time the boys keep telling me what could go wrong when you're up the front preaching and i always find something to go wrong anyway i'll say again good morning everyone it's nice to be with you this morning continuing our series in revelation at the reset series so we've been saying that revelation is a view of the world from god's perspective and what an eye-opener it was to john when first revealed to him and still an eye-opener to us all these years later it's a real eye-opener chapter 1 verse 90 20 to see jesus so focused and passionate about continuing to grow and protect his church in the world it's a real eye-opener that jesus speaks so directly to his church through these seven representative churches demanding that we reflect his passion and reflect his commitment to his church it's a real eye-opener that the church in ephesus looks so good from the outside taking all the boxes for a great church yet they were dangerously unwell on the inside at some point they'd given their heart away jesus was no longer their validation their satisfaction or their delight and it was a real eye-opener that the church in smyrna which looks so awful from the outside staggering under endless persecution yet they were declared rich faithful healthy so single-minded in their love for christ that they were willing to give up everything for him even life itself now every one of these thoughts cause us to re-examine ourselves and if necessary reset do we have the church as central in our purposes as christ has do we reflect christ's passion as we're involved in the local church here at grace do we have our heart firmly attached to jesus or have we given it to somebody else or something else what is our view of suffering do we walk away from it as though somehow or other it's not compatible with the christian life so many things that we really need to examine and if necessary reset so that we might be the faithful church and this morning christ's word to the community of christ in pergamum is also a real eye-opener as he exposes their creeping compromise of the gospel now verse 13 starts as with every other letter jesus opening words i know both wonderfully comforting and totally confronting so jesus knows the challenge of our culture he knew how difficult it was for the community of christians in pergamum now that's a real comfort pergamum was a center of roman imperial power in asia the high official the pro consul literally lived in a former palace and he presided over an administration which was openly indulgent sexually immoral politically corrupt as well as that it was a center of learning large library people coming from all over the world to study and practice a huge array of life philosophies and the skyline was dominated by huge temples to the major roman and greek gods various aspects of these religions saturated shaped and dominated the daily life of everyone in the city

and verse 13 there's an image there it looked and felt like satan's home base as if evil was enthroned vice became virtue and for all its religion it was a strongly anti the god of the christian city anti the god of truth and righteousness now in today's term we would say it was a cosmopolitan permissive society a sydney a los angeles one we recognize only too well living here in australia but jesus also knows the danger of being seduced by our culture and now his words become really confronting now verse 13 and 14 and 15 they're unwavering faithfulness and loyalty in the past and jesus concedes that recognizes that commends them for that but that's now been undermined by a creeping compromise and verses 14 and 15 two groups are identified the first group is those who hold to the teaching of balam which is an old testament image and the story is in numbers 22 to 31 and the king of moab terrified by god's people heading his way en route to the promised land was desperate to find a way to defeat them they were too powerful to defeat militarily so king balak asked balam to pronounce a curse on them god intervened and wouldn't allow that however it appears that balam inferred a pathway of seduction and compromise would have the same result it would defeat god's people and in numbers chapter 25 verses 1 to 4 we have a description of how god's people became increasingly drawn into the moral spiritual and physical practices of pagan moabite society so much so to the point that they were so compromised it was a joke to call themselves god's holy and that word means separated or covenant people there was no more separation that was just integration the second group verse 15 are those who hold to the teaching of the nicolaitans now that was a new group operating in the early church and it appears it had similar it was connected to that old concept of balam the name might actually be connected but it seems like it was a similar group but a tad more radical as far as the scholars know and historians know this group promoted and justified viewpoints which allowed christians to take on many of the social and religious values and religious practices of their pagan society without hesitation or a sense of guilt well it's all pagan nonsense so it can't hurt us now we need to understand that society in that day was really close-knit very highly interconnected interrelated relationally and so daily life was built around religious duty religious feasts on religious holidays in honor of pagan gods and all of it all of it was designed to keep the gods happy so that life was successful and prosperous now it was all in to keep the gods happy so that means if you refuse to participate in the daily temple routines prayers religious feasts

or religious holidays then effectively you were condemning your whole culture offending your whole community alienating family and friends and worst of all threatening everyone's prosperity by annoying the gods and getting them offside there was a lot at stake but if you did go along to the community festivals even if you didn't fully participate then you would be associated with everything that did happen and not only would you risk getting sucked in more and more but your association would effectively lose any integrity or identity you might have as a Christian it all sounds familiar doesn't it living and engaging in culture is tough now the point here in this passage is that in this pressure environment it was easy to miss or turn a blind eye to creeping compromise now we need to understand really clearly here that the problem in the church is not outright rebellion it's not blatant disobedience no no it's actually much more subtle much more nuanced than that it's more like how we become desensitized to the things of our culture to the emptiness of it to the immorality of it and what happens over a period of time is that things we used to be shocked at things we used to turn our eyes from things we used to condemn we now tolerate we now accept quietly we now sometimes even find ways to justify and approve and make no mistake unless we're really careful we won't even notice it happens that's the notion of creeping compromise so friends the question for us this morning is not if we are being seduced by our culture but to what degree are we being seduced by our culture now let's turn the question around as we move forward what does it mean then to be Christ's faithful church in our culture well this is again a call to reset our attitudes our desires our actions individually and together as one body we need to remember we must remember

Christ's call to distinctiveness the teaching right across the New Testament is that Christians and indeed the Old Testament Christians are to be in the world but not of the world in Revelation chapter 1 verse 6 we're told there that we have been made told by Jesus we've been made a kingdom of priests among other things that means we are at God's hand a distinct group with the privilege and responsibility of speaking his word and modelling his character to our world that is our distinctiveness again in chapter 1 verse 12 and in chapter 1 verse 16 we're lampstands we're stars both are sources of light emitting the light of Jesus in the darkness of our world and exposing the empty way of life handed down by our forefathers to use the words of Peter in 1 Peter chapter 1 now we're called to this individually if you look at verse 14 and 15 it's very clear

[13 : 52] Jesus is very clear there is some in the church who hold to these things that is not everyone in the church is guilty of creeping compromise in that sense of being involved in those things in fact verse 13 says yet you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness who was killed among you were Satan dwells at some point in the past one of the local Christians Antipas had been killed now we're not told why but presumably in the context it was because he refused to give in to the pressure to conform to society he refused to play by local rules but notice how he's described by Jesus he's described as my faithful witness the word the word there is martyr my faithful martyr my faithful witness and the point is that Jesus readily and warmly identifies with and approves the uncompromising gospel life of Antipas even though it led to his death now here's the challenge our so-called permissive society shows itself to be ruthlessly intolerant when someone refuses to play by its rules and in the end our world really only often offers two options either seduction and compromise or alienation persecution perhaps even death so which one will you choose it's a fairly simple equation that may help you work it out if your starting point is to think of outcomes that is what will keep you safe what will give you a hassle free life what will make you happy what will bring greatest acceptance in the world you operate in then you're likely to say to yourself well

I really need to get involved in the world and so the question then is how much can I indulge in the pleasures of Australian culture before calling myself a Christian becomes a joke do you hear the attitude in that now most likely if that's your framework then you will be widely accepted by your mates but you'll also be irrelevant as a witness to Christ and worse totally offensive to but if your starting point is to think of values and identity that is who am I as a Christian what does that mean for me what is important in life then you're likely to ask what will most honour Jesus what will most reflect his character to those around me and most likely you will suffer dearly for your distinctive stand but I tell you this it will be the most clear and compelling witness to

Christ and the changing power of the gospel and we need to remember that the best witness is distinctiveness not likeness now we're also called to distinctiveness as a whole body look at verse 16 and there might be some discussion around this but I think this is what track we're going down here verse 16 Jesus says therefore repent if not I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth as he has been doing right through the letter Jesus is speaking to the church as a whole and here in verse 16 he called the church community as a whole group to repent now does that seem strange to you why would he do that well I think it goes like this while not all are guilty of actual compromise

Jesus holds the whole community responsible for not dealing with those who were the verses are very clear you have some among you the idea there is that they're there and you're not doing anything about it and so what happens is this that their failure or willingness to act for the spiritual good of their brothers and sisters caught up in this compromise by challenging them actually endanger the spiritual health of the whole church and I take it that's why Christ says that in verse 16 that if they don't do something about it then he'll have to come if they don't repent and take action then he'll have to come and take them on tackle them now that possibility is downright terrifying giving the imagery in verse 12 so go back to verse 12 and also back in chapter 1 verse 16 the same imagery it's the imagery of the short sharp two-edged sword now let me give you a little bit of background

Roman soldiers were feared in battle because of the new technology they used in their phalanx fighting form it was a new technology of a short two-edged sword and it was incredibly effective in close up combat Jesus is warning his church that if they do not wield the sword of his word chapter 1 verse 16 the sword of his word was coming out of his mouth they do not wield the sword of his word to challenge and correct those sliding into compromise and loss of distinctive us as people then he will come and open them up quite literally he will open them up now that picks up an image from Hebrews 4 he will open them up his word will expose their inner thoughts and desires or worse still Jesus may be threatening to take them out completely both those guilty of compromise and those guilty of not doing anything about it friends this is so contrary to how we think in our individualistic

[21 : 02] Australian culture but it comes down to this each of us has responsibility to guard against compromise in our whole church community not enough just to look after yourself and say well others can look after themselves not enough to make sure your own heart is right your own pathway is right and turn a blind eye to others who are on the pathway of compromise but again here's the problem we are so individualistic that either we won't accept such challenge when others bring it to us or we just ignore compromise when we say it for the sake of peace and quiet it's not my problem what a huge call to reset our attitudes and actions this letter is but it finishes on a really promising and positive note as do all the letters remember

Christ's promises for distinctiveness verse 17 holds two promises he who is in the ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches to the one who conquers or struggles through I will give some of the hidden manna and I will give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it first the promise of hidden manna what's that a picture of well it's an old testament picture from the exodus as many pictures in revelation are and it goes like this I think just as God provided for his people even when they were thinking that more satisfaction would be found back in Egypt remember that they were in the wilderness and they said well better back in Egypt eating onions than out here with the Lord even at that point God provided them total satisfaction and manna so Jesus the bread of life is complete satisfaction for hungry people practically what it means is this don't look to the world no matter how pleasurable how appealing how showy its indulgences seem it can't and won't satisfy but there is hidden satisfaction in Jesus remember the manna was something that

God's people could see that others couldn't see there is hidden satisfaction in Jesus something Christians can see and indulge in but those around them can't see or benefit from and just think we are crazy as Christians they don't know the hidden satisfaction that is ours in Jesus so why compromise why go to somewhere else that can't and won't satisfy the promise is that God's people will not miss out there's so many things in our culture that look so appealing and it's easy for us to start thinking that we'll miss out if we don't have them we don't experience them that's the start of compromise the attitude of compromise Christ says to his people you have no need to fear the consequences of being loyal and faithful to me you will not miss out you will have full satisfaction you will dine on the richest of fair the second promise is the promise of a white stone with a special name written on it and that seems really weird to us but it wouldn't have been at all weird to people living in

Pergamum because what it is it's an invitation so in Roman society the proconsul or other high officials invited invited invited special guests to important events using a square white stone actually a piece of clay it was a square white piece of clay with the person's name engraved on it in modern terms I think it's something equivalent of having access all areas past to the white house you can just wander in there because it's your place it's your domain you have a right to be there you're welcome there Jesus is promising that those who stay loyal to him who may well experience the rejection of their society or family will never be rejected by him in fact he will treat them as his special guest in heaven where he and again the temple imagery comes in here where he as the temple remember revelation chapter 22 the true temple he is the temple will dwarf anything the skyline of

Pergamum can boast remember what the temple was the temple was where you would meet God the temple was where your success and prosperity and security in life was found forgiveness and acceptance well Jesus says don't be looking at your skyline here in Pergamum look to me come to me in heaven we'll see me the true temple and you will know forgiveness and acceptance with the father and you will see how ridiculous all this other stuff was that seemed so appealing so convincing so much the basis of society is just so nothing here on earth you might look like just another person being abused or killed but from the perspective of heaven it is taking up your pre-booked seat in heaven with the Lord forever so the final question is whose invitation do you desire more whose invitation do you value more whose invitation do you get more excited about is it the invitation to be welcomed and accepted by the world represented by your non-Christian family your friends your neighbours those in your workplace those in your sporting team or when they offer those invitations is that what gets you excited is that what takes your tweaks your interest or is it the invitation that the world offers generally the vast array of pleasures and distractions that our culture offers we see it on the

[27 : 39] TV all the time that's advertising come and enjoy this you haven't lived until you experienced that you can be this sort of person in that sort of place and it messes with our heads well this messes with my head anyway what invitation excites you what invitation do you desire what invitation do you long for is it that that comes from the world in myriad forms or is it the invitation from Jesus you can't accept both invitations let me pray Lord again you've spoken both words of terrific comfort you do know our situations in great detail but Lord your words of comfort become words of confrontation when you see into our hearts you know Lord our attitudes and when those attitudes are not aligned with what is becoming for us your people

Lord help us to hear your word help us to use your word and your spirits working within us to dig deep into our own hearts to use the sword of your word to divide our thoughts and our passions right down to our innermost being so we can see what's really happening on the inside and Lord take action to correct that which is wrong help us Lord to avoid that creeping compromise that loses our identity and loses our witness to you help us to think about this as a church collectively as well as individually in Jesus name I pray Amen