

Welcome

I was visiting my dad a few years ago and decided to make myself some breakfast. You know how that goes when you're in someone else's house, right? My parents were already at work, so I was at their house alone, and just sort of scrounging for whatever I could find.

Luckily, I found a carton of eggs and a little cheese, so I decided to scramble some eggs. I broke the eggs into a bowl, sprinkled in some cheese and went back to the fridge for some milk.

There was no milk.

If you want really terrifically fluffy scrambled eggs, you have to have a dash of milk. I was about to shrug it off and consign myself to fine eggs (rather than terrific eggs), when I spotted some coffee creamer. BOOM. Half and half is a great substitute for milk - probably make those eggs even a little *richer*.

I grabbed the creamer and poured in just a dollop while congratulating myself on my culinary ingenuity. The mixture went into the pan, and in no time, I had some beautiful scrambled eggs to sate my morning hunger. I dug in fork in hand, scooping the first bite into my mouth.

Uh oh.

Something was... off.

Just a little.

I took another bite. Smaller this time.

Huh.

It's definitely not... quite... right. It's... a little too sweet? I think?

Is the creamer bad?

I run to the fridge and grab the creamer, scan the label for the expiration date. No, it's definitely not expired. I flip it open to smell it.

There it is. That sweet odor. That's what was in the eggs!

I look at the label again and... it's vanilla flavored creamer.

Welp. So much for my kitchen ingenuity. How about some dry cereal?

If you spend any time in the kitchen, you likely have a story of a similar mixup. You grab the salt instead of the sugar. You mix up baking powder and baking soda (how different can they really be?)

But cooking is a science as much as an art. Ingredients combine and react with each other in specific ways, to create those delicious, delicious flavors we crave. The little things make a big difference, and substitutions aren't always wise or acceptable.

We're going to explore the composition of our faith today, and I want to invite you to interrogate with me what we're mixing our faith out of. Because it's a lot easier than we might think to think we can substitute other things for the way of Jesus, and while in the moment it seems harmless, the end product is a faith that isn't much of a faith at all.

The best way for us to come out with a strong faith is to follow the recipe, so to speak. To keep our eyes on Jesus, the one who saves us and who calls us and the one we are called to become.

Message

This is the season of Lent, which is a season the Church sets aside to prepare to celebrate Easter. Lent is a season where we take time to interrogate our hearts for sin, so that when we find ways that we have turned from God, we can confess that sin, repent and turn to God.

This year, our Lent series is called Under Pressure. We're going to visit the seven cities of the book of Revelation, to listen in to what Jesus had to say to those churches.

Those seven cities were all in the Roman province of Asia, what we call today Turkey. The Revelation was written at the end of the first century, when a Caesar named Diocletian was on the throne. Unlike Nero a generation earlier, Diocletian didn't really care about Christians. There was no officially sanctioned wide-spread persecution.

But the churches in those seven cities all faced one important question: in a world that wants you to worship Caesar as Lord, who will you serve?

Jesus? Or Caesar?

There're probably a million different ways to answer that question, and we're looking at seven of them over the season of Lent. These seven churches had seven different responses to "How do we stay faithful to Jesus in an unfaithful world?"

And not all their responses were good. But for John, no matter where the churches were, no matter how they were struggling, they needed the same thing: a fresh revelation of Jesus. That's what we see at the end of Chapter 1, just before John writes the letters:

When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from his mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave. -- Revelation 1:12-18

Believe it or not, this intense, bizarre, cosmic vision of Jesus is what all seven of these churches need to be faithful to Jesus.

And he's who we need too. Just watch and learn.

On Ash Wednesday, we began with the Church in Ephesus. We saw that, though held on to the teaching of Jesus with a death-drip, they'd held on so hard their claws had come out, claws they used to destroy people who didn't see the world the way they did. We saw on Ash Wednesday that John called them to remember their first love - Jesus himself.

Last week, we met the Smyrnan church, who were following Jesus well, and suffering for it. Today, we're going to the ancient city of Pergamum.

[Scripture Slide] Pergamum was the first city in the region to adopt Roman rule, and they were really proud of their devotion to Caesar. They considered themselves sort of the "Rome of the East", modeling their architecture and governance on Rome's model. Because of their loyalty, Rome rewarded them with an Imperial Temple. Further, they were the equivalent of the district court for the whole region. Disputes from all around came to Pergamum to face rulings before they might be appealed to Rome herself.

Much like we saw in Smyrna last week, the citizens of Pergamum highly valued public loyalty to Rome. All citizens were expected to at least pretend to worship Rome, to participate in the public sacrifices and festivals. In Smyrna, we saw the Christians there refused, and were suffering for it. In fact, it seems that one person in Pergamum has been killed for his faith.

But there's a contingent of Pergamumite Christians who are advocating for something different. As far as they're concerned, there's no reason for Christians to be facing persecution (and even execution) for following Jesus. They're advocating that it's possible to be Roman and Christian, to add a little Jesus to your Roman citizenship.

We're not sure exactly what that looked like, but as far as we can tell, these teachers (a group who followed a teacher named Nicholas), taught that Christians could participate in all the public Roman religious and political ceremonies, worship the Roman gods and still worship Jesus too. In other words, do what you have to do to stay out of trouble, to keep your life from being too hard, and God won't mind. We can serve Jesus on weekends and Caesar Monday thru Friday.

You might not be surprised that Jesus is not a fan of this idea, so I want to read what he has to say to this church together with you. As we read, we'll not the symbolic language Jesus uses and come back to it.

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Pergamum. This is the message from the one with the sharp two-edged sword:

“I know that you live in the city where Satan has his throne, yet you have remained loyal to me. You refused to deny me even when Antipas, my faithful witness, was martyred among you there in Satan’s city.

Probably more than any of the other letters, this letter to Pergamum illustrates John's deep understanding of the Jewish scripture and his ability to combine old symbols for new uses. Notice that he refers to Pergamum as the city with Satan's throne - an allusion to Pergamum's status as the judgment seat in the East for Rome's justice.

“But I have a few complaints against you. You tolerate some among you whose teaching is like that of Balaam, who showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin. In a similar way, you have some Nicolaitans among you who follow the same teaching.

John also makes reference to a story from the book of Numbers about a prophet named Balaam (yes, the guy with the talking donkey). Balaam became known as a sort of mercenary prophet, a guy whose spirituality was for sale to the highest bidder. John looks at these disciples of Nicholas as the same sort of teachers, which tells us a lot about what they're actually teaching. John says they're teaching them to "eat food offered to idols and commit sexual sin". These are both Biblical code language for worshipping other gods, and the god in question in Pergamum is Rome herself.

It's easy to put ourselves in these teachers' shoes, isn't it? They have a good life in Pergamum. Their city is wealthy and prosperous because of the benevolence of Rome. Best not to antagonize that. Jesus has some good teachings, but that doesn't mean his way and Caesar's way are mutually exclusive. But Jesus wasn't content to share. Listen to how he warns the Christians in Pergamum who would divide their allegiances:

Repent of your sin, or I will come to you suddenly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Yikes! Jesus will fight us with? With a sword?! These are real stakes - they illustrate how seriously Jesus takes these false teachings that divide our loyalties. But notice again what kind of sword it is: Jesus says the sword is that coming out of his mouth.

A common image in the Scriptures is the Word of God as a sword - the prophets employed it and the sermon we now call the book of Hebrews - which probably was written some thirty years before Revelation, calls the Word of God a sharp, 2-edged sword. The imagery is exactly what it sounds like: the best way to separate truth from fiction, good teaching from false teaching, is to use the very words God speaks. (And don't forget that in John's gospel, Jesus himself is the Word of God!)

So it's Jesus' very presence that separates truth from falsehood in our lives.

This would have resonated strongly with Pergamum, the "Rome of the East". The people of Pergamum took a lot of pride in how closely their city imitated Rome. Roman architecture, Roman customs, Roman fashions. They wanted to be a reflection of Rome, an image of Rome in the East. When people walked into Pergamum, they should feel as though they just walked into Rome itself.

But as Christians, we're not to look like the world around us. We don't pattern ourselves off anyone but Jesus. The word "Christian" itself means "little Christs". We're to be images of Jesus.

So, say you're one of those Christians in Pergamum. You're confused about exactly what it means to look like Jesus and not Caesar. How can you get clarity? Surely nothing could make it more clear than seeing Jesus himself, right?

When you know what the original looks like, you know what a good image looks like.

And of course, to "look like Jesus" doesn't mean we all grow beards and wear sandals. We're not talking about physical appearance, but the fruits of our lives. Back to baking - have you ever mixed up baking soda and baking powder? They're not really that different. They're both white powders. They both start with the word "baking". No big deal, right?

Let me tell you: if you've ever mixed them up, you know they couldn't be more different. I did that making pancakes one time. The recipe called for baking powder and I used soda instead. They weren't pancakes. They were inedible.

They might be easy to confuse. But - especially if you know what pancakes are supposed to taste like - it's impossible to confuse the results.

If we're not sure what is true, if we're not clear on the difference between Jesus and Caesar, we need to know Jesus better. Because when you know Jesus, it's impossible to confuse him with the Caesars of our world.

We need to look at the fruits of his life - how he comforted the afflicted and disturbed the powerful. How he welcomed in those who had been cast out and rebuked those who had excluded them. How he trained up followers to share in his mission, made family out of everyone he met, was unfailingly generous.

Nothing could be further from the fruits of Caesar's way in the world.

Which brings us to today. Do we know the difference between Jesus and Caesar today? Can you name the ways Jesus differs from your political party?

Can you list the ways Jesus' values differ from the values at your job?

Can you explain how Jesus' way differs from the way you were raised?

Can you differentiate between your cultural values and the values of Jesus people?

And let's be clear here: I'm not asking how *their* politics or raising or culture differs from Jesus. I'm asking how *yours* does. We're all really good at critiquing other people's lives, values and attitudes. We're *not* very good at honest self-reflection.

In that way, we're a lot like the Christians in Pergamum. We need what they needed: a fresh revelation of Jesus

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We learn who Jesus is by meeting him at his table.

1. How do my politics differ from Jesus' politics?
2. How does my family values differ from Jesus' family values?
3. How does my work ethic differ from Jesus' attitude toward work?
4. How is God calling me to be faithful this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Choosing to be different is hard. What is Jesus' promise?

“Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. To everyone who is victorious I will give some of the manna that has been hidden away in heaven. And I will give to each one a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one understands except the one who receives it. -- Revelation 2:12-17

Jesus promises to protect and empower us. Our job is to remain faithful images of Jesus himself.