

Letters to the Seven Churches: Pergamum

REVELATION 2:12-17

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****COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE****

It is good to see you this morning! I hope you have the elements for the Lord's Supper with you. John will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning. And then, Clayton will be leading us in "Sing and be Happy" (#841).

We are starting, this morning, with a summary of God's plan for our salvation. This is repetition for most of us, but we make sure to do this every time we get together, because we don't know whether this is the first, the last, or the only time for somebody to be with us. And even if we've heard the good news a thousand times, we need the reminder – not only for our own benefit, but as a reminder that we need to be telling others. God sent his only Son to die on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. And in response, once we believe that good news, we turn to God with a change of heart concerning sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism.

And once again, we are starting today with an example. This one comes from a friend of mine who preaches down in Martin, Tennessee, and it's a picture of JT being baptized by his dad. That's about all I know, but we are thankful for the reminder. What JT has done just a few days ago, you can do this morning. If you would like to learn more, please give us a call or send a message. The church number is 608-224-0274.

This morning, we continue our series of lessons on Jesus' messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Back in December, we learned that the book of Revelation is written by the apostle John, from a Roman prison colony on the island of Patmos, most likely in the mid-90's AD. John writes to encourage the church as they endure some intense persecution, and the message is: In the end, God wins, so hang in there! We started, then, by introducing Jesus. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is revealed for who he really is. We also learned that Revelation is addressed primarily to seven congregations in Asia Minor. We are basically reading other churches' mail! Each letter is addressed to the "**angel**" or the "**messenger**" of the congregation – either an angel-angel (an actual angel that had been assigned to the congregation, guardian angel-style) or perhaps the "evangelist" of the congregation.

Two weeks ago, then, we moved into Revelation 2 by looking at the first message, written to the church in EPHESUS. We learned that the church in Ephesus was really good at standing for the truth and weeding out false

teachers, but they had left their first love, Jesus says, and so he calls them to repent and return and to do the things that they did at the beginning. Then, last week, we looked at Jesus' message to the church in SMYRNA. We learned that the Christians in Smyrna had been pressured and slandered, but they are not condemned for anything; instead, Jesus encourages them to *"be faithful until death,"* and he would give them the crown of life – nothing but encouragement in that message.

I. Today, we move to the next message, and this one is intended for the church in PERGAMUM.

By the way, before we get to the text itself, I just want to give the reminder that we are using the same basic outline for all of these lessons. We're looking at the CITY itself and any background information we might have, we'll read the TEXT, then we'll look at how JESUS describes himself, we'll look at the POSITIVE part of the message, then the NEGATIVE, followed by any COMMANDS that are given, and then ending with CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

Here at the beginning, though, let's look at PERGAMUM itself. Obviously, Pergamum is the northernmost of the seven churches. It's located near the ancient city of Troy. And for many years it was recognized as the capital of this area. It was the seat of government. Like Madison, it was a capital city. But it was also a center of worship for a number of pagan gods. One of the largest and most prominent temples in Pergamum was the temple dedicated to Zeus, the "chief god" in the Greek and Roman system. Back in the mid-1800's, a German archaeologist discovered a ginormous altar to Zeus. Over a number of years, he collected the pieces and brought it back to Berlin, where he reconstructed it. World War I slowed things down a bit, but they got it all together in 1930, I believe...just in time for another World War. Archaeologists did the best they could to protect it from the bombings, then we had the Cold War. But today, you can go see this if you're interested. And it is massive. You can perhaps see how tiny the people are up on those upper levels in the background. I would also point out that the altar was apparently designed to resemble a THRONE of some kind. We can almost picture Zeus sitting up on top of this hill with his arms on the throne.

In Pergamum, though, this altar to Zeus was even more imposing, because it was on top of something of a rock outcropping roughly 1000 feet above sea level, towering over the city. The picture on the wall up here is of the site where the altar used to be. The picture was taken back in 2005, but hopefully it gives us at least some perspective. It's a little hard to see, but I think we do notice here that this hill (in the foreground) looks down on the rest of the city. It is said that the smoke from this altar could be seen from miles around. It was a defining feature of the city. This is another picture that might give us the bigger picture. It's a panoramic shot of the whole area. But this one allows us to see the ruins of the temple area on the hill to the left, and then we can also see the more modern city down in the middle, in the background.

But we also know that in addition to the altar of Zeus, there were several other major temples in Pergamum, including (among others) a temple to Asclepius, the "god" of medicine and healing. The temple of Aesclepius was the "Mayo Clinic" of its day. If you some weird disease, you went to Pergamum. By the way, his daughter was Hygieia, the personification of cleanliness. So, when we use the word "hygiene" today, it goes back to the daughter of Asclepius. I would also point out that his "mascot" is a snake. And in the temple to Asclepius in Pergamum, they would put you in a room full of snakes for the night, and if one slithered over you while you were sleeping, that meant you were healed! In the ruins of this temple, they have found clay reproductions of various body parts, and the idea is: If Aesclepius healed you of something, you might recreate the body part that was healed and leave it as an offering. A little weird, but that's the leading theory as they've been uncovering tons of seemingly random body parts. By the way, the "rod of Aesclepius" might be a bit familiar to us today, as

we've probably seen it on an ambulance or at the doctor's office. The idea is: It goes back to using a stick to slowly remove a worm that's buried itself under your skin. Some of us remember that unit from biology way back when. When a parasitic worm is under the skin, you can't just yank it out, but you would slowly pull it out over the course of several days, wrapped around a stick. Anyway, I point this out just to show us that we probably already know more about Pergamum than we think we do!

I would also point out that Pergamum was also known for the development of parchment. In fact, the word "parchment" actually goes back to the Latin form of the city's name. In roughly 300 BC, Pergamum had the world's second-largest library, with 200,000 volumes, second only to the great library in Alexandria, Egypt. Well, nobody wants the second largest library, so in an effort to increase the size of their library, Pergamum tried to poach the head librarian from Alexandria to give them some papyrus lessons. They needed more paper! Well, the king of Egypt wasn't too thrilled by that, so he put his librarian in chains – chained him to his work! And he also enacted a papyrus embargo, "No more papyrus for you!" Well, in response, the library in Pergamum turned to making "paper" out of animal skins. With extensive research and after much trial and error, Pergamum came up with some new techniques for smoothing and polishing those skins. Pergamum, then, is known as the leading producer of parchment in the ancient world, and a shift takes place at this point in history, from papyrus (which is plant-based) to parchment (which is basically the skin of an animal, and much more durable than papyrus). It all goes back to an international incident over the hiring of a librarian right here in Pergamum.

So, with this as background, let's look together at Revelation 2:12-17, the message from Jesus (through John) to the church in Pergamum – Revelation 2:12-17,

¹² "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: ¹³ 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. ¹⁵ So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. ¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

II. As we get back to our outline, let's notice here at the beginning how JESUS DESCRIBES HIMSELF in this message.

He is "**...the One who has the sharp two-edged sword.**" Now, for most of us, we are more familiar with knives that are sharp on one side – a butter knife, and a steak knife, and various kitchen knives, and most pocket knives – they are all sharp on one side. But here, Jesus is described as having a "**sharp two-edged sword.**" And remember: This goes back to the vision of Jesus in Chapter 1, where Jesus is pictured with this two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. Most Roman swords were two-edged. And in Pergamum, the government had "the right of the sword," as it was sometimes called. They had the right to carry out the death penalty, quickly, without checking back with Rome for permission. And it seems that all of this is wrapped up in this image of Jesus with the sharp two-edged sword. And coming out of his mouth (going back to Chapter 1), it seems to represent his word. As the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:12, "**...the word of God is living and active and**

sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” His word cuts both ways, his word is accurate, his word is powerful, and his word makes the difference between life and death. And just as the sword of Rome represented their power and authority, so also Jesus’ sword (his word) represents his power and authority. According to Jesus in John 12:47-48, his word will judge us on the last day. Of all the competing voices in this world, then, we need to make sure we are listening to his voice (his word) above all others. And for those in Pergamum who had been listening to Jesus’ words, this would be reassuring, but to those who had not, this would be a reminder. His word is important. His word means everything to us.

III. As we move into verse 13, we have the COMPLIMENT.

And the compliment is, ***“I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.”*** As they read this, they’re probably looking at this huge throne-shaped altar to Zeus towering over the city. The Lord, then, is explaining here that he knows how hard it is. Yes, this is an evil city. Today, we know that cities have nicknames. We think of Chicago as “the Windy City,” we think of Paris as being “the City of Lights,” we think of New York as being “the Big Apple,” we think of Las Vegas as “Sin City,” we think of New Orleans as “the Big Easy,” we think of Detroit as “Motor City,” we think of Green Bay as “Titletown.” Well, Pergamum was known as being ***“where Satan’s throne is.”*** It’s tough to be a Christian in Pergamum – it’s the provincial capital of Rome, it’s full of idols and pagan temples, it’s full of all kinds of immorality, and Jesus says, ***“I know.”*** I know this. I understand where you are living. I know it’s difficult there. To Ephesus, Jesus says, ***“I know your deeds.”*** To Smyrna, Jesus says, ***“I know your tribulation.”*** But to Pergamum, Jesus basically says, ***“I know where you live”*** [paraphrased]. I know you are living in a tough situation. I know what you have to endure because you live in this particular place.

Is it safe to say that Jesus knows where we live today? Absolutely! Does he see the crime? Yes. Does he see the ungodly influences all around us? Yes. Does he see the challenges our kids face in school? Yes. Does he see the acceptance of evil masquerading as tolerance? Yes to all of these! Jesus knows where we live, and he knows the unique challenges we face – whether we live right here in Madison, or in Lodi, and even if you are joining us today from somewhere in Tennessee, or Washington, or Alaska, or India. Jesus knows where we live, and he understands.

And yet, even living in the evil environment of Pergamum, Jesus seems to be especially impressed here, as he says that despite these challenges ***“you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”*** Despite the challenges, you have held on, you have remained faithful to my name.

And this proves that a faithful church can exist in a wicked community. In fact, there are no outward influences that can prevent us from being faithful [KENYON]. After all, they are practically living in Satan-ville, and somehow they have held on to the faith. And this is where we come to Antipas. Jesus gives Antipas as an example. This is all we know, but we know from this that Antipas seems to have been killed for not denying the Lord’s name. Jesus refers to him as ***“my faithful one,”*** his ***“faithful witness.”*** By the way, John refers to Jesus as the ***“faithful witness”*** (back in Revelation 1:5). But Antipas was apparently ***“faithful until death,”*** just as Jesus told the people in Smyrna to be. We have an early tradition suggesting that Antipas was put inside a hollowed out brass bull, and then that bull was heated by fire. They had horn-shaped holes in the bull so the person screaming inside would make the bull sound angry, as the person was burned to death inside. This is another image of what is known as the “brazen bull” being used as a method of torture and execution. Who knows whether this is true (this is just tradition), but it is clear that Antipas is praised here. Be like Antipas!

Antipas, by the way, joins a long line of those who lived faithfully in spite of awful influence from the world around them – we think of Noah, and Abraham, and Joseph, and Moses, and Daniel, and so on. We look around us, and we need that encouragement. The world around us, amazingly, is acting like the world has always acted – crude, evil, with all forms of immorality – and trying to pull us down with them. That’s what the world does. Our job is to take courage from people like Antipas, praised here for being faithful. And like Antipas, Jesus also knows where WE live. He knows the temptations we face. He knows the immorality all around us. He knows that you are enduring a difficult marriage. He knows the pressure you face at school or work. And we might wish we were somewhere else with less pressure, but like those Christians in Pergamum, we aren’t somewhere else; we are right here. And Christ wants us to stay faithful. He knows where we live.

By the way, before we move on from Antipas, I would just briefly mention that there is one more Antipas in the Bible, Herod Antipas – the king condemned by John the Baptist for being in an unscriptural marriage (“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife”), the king who seems to have been so turned on by the dancing of his young stepdaughter that he promised her up to half of his kingdom, the king who gave in and ordered John’s beheading. From an earthly point of view, which Antipas would you rather be: Antipas the king or Antipas who was burned to death in a bronze bull? Most would choose the life of a king, and yet both men have been dead for nearly 2,000 years now and are both awaiting the final judgment. I don’t know about you, but right now I would much rather be in the position of the Antipas from Revelation. As Jesus said in Revelation 2:10, **“Be faithful until death and I will give you the crown of life.”** Jesus knows where we live, and he praises those who are faithful.

IV. In our outline, we come to the CRITICISM, and the criticism here is rather severe.

In verses 14-15 we find that Jesus has a few things against these people – some of them hold to the teaching of Balaam. This right here is why some people don’t read the book of Revelation! Some of this seems a bit weird, but we start digging in the book of Numbers, and we learn that as God’s people are on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land, a local king named Balak sees them coming, he panics, and he tries to hire some kind of rent-a-prophet to come in and curse the Israelites on God’s behalf. The for-profit prophet really wants the job, but every time he tries to curse Gods’ people, a blessing pops out! Finally, he comes up with a work-around. Instead of a curse, he realizes all he really needs to do is to tempt the Israelites with what is basically curse-worthy behavior. So, I might not be able to curse them directly, but if I can somehow get them to sin, then God will be legit upset and will pretty much curse them for me. And that’s what he does. Toward the end of the book of Numbers, the prophet Balaam teaches King Balak to use some beautiful Moabite women to lure the people into sexual sin and into the worship of idols.

And that seems to be pretty much what is happening in Pergamum. In verse 14, as with ancient Israel, it all comes down to sex and eating. The frontal assault isn’t working. Burning an elder in a brass bull isn’t working. But like Antipas, God’s people are standing firm. They are not worshiping the emperor (even under the threat of death). However, they are starting to tolerate some sinful behavior. And notice: This isn’t something everybody in this church is doing, but instead, **“you have some there who hold [to this] teaching.”** You are putting up with this. And now we have this **“stumbling block”** in the congregation. As I understand it, the word **“stumbling block”** refers to the part of a trap you put the bait on. That’s an awful picture. This church is standing firm for the Lord’s name, but they are tolerating this big chunk of cheese on the trap, right there among them. Maybe they aren’t worshiping the emperor directly, but they’re attending work parties that do. They are justifying behavior. They are overlooking some evil influences in the church. They are getting along a little too well with the world. That seems to be the problem in Pergamum: Compromise! This is what James warns about

in James 4:4 when he says, ***“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”*** Satan couldn’t get these people to deny Jesus directly, so he tries the indirect approach: Compromise. And before long, the church looks just like the world around it: Mission accomplished. The leaven is spreading in the lump of dough.

We don’t have anything in the New Testament about the Nicolaitans, but secular sources seem to suggest it might have been something similar – they might hold the name of Jesus, but they are a bit too loose with what they are teaching. And so, on one hand, the church in Ephesus ***“hated”*** the deeds of the Nicolaitans, but the Christians in Pergamum were starting to accept it and were teaching it.

So, on one hand, these people are ready to die for their faith, but on the other hand, they seem to be tolerating some stuff they really shouldn’t be tolerating. Does that ever happen in the church today? Like many around us today, they were perhaps starting to worship tolerance itself. “I don’t personally worship Zeus, but who am I to condemn my brother who does? Who am I to divide the church over this? I personally believe that X is wrong (abortion, homosexuality, pornography, getting drunk, living with your girlfriend, or whatever), but who am I to judge?” and so on. They are tolerating their own people starting to merge with the world. It sounds similar to what was happening in Corinth as the church accepted that man who was living in sexual sin with his own stepmother. Instead of rebuking that situation, they were proud of how loving and tolerant they were. Paul condemns that attitude, and now Jesus does here as well. As a church, we can sin by not calling out sin among our members. We can sin by ignoring sin. We can sin by tolerating. So, what is the solution?

V. This leads us to the COMMAND.

In verse 16, Jesus says, ***“Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.”*** I’ve never thought about it this way, but somebody has described ***“repent”*** as one of the most beautiful words in the Bible. And his point was: Repentance opens the door to knowing the Lord even better than we do right now. Repentance is the process of becoming more and more like Jesus. Repentance is a change of heart, a change of mind that results in a change in the way we live. If we hear that command to repent, it means that there’s still time left. It’s a merciful command, calling us to change.

And yet, if they refuse to repent, Jesus says that he will come to them quickly and will ***“make war against them with the sword of [his] mouth.”*** I don’t want that! I don’t want Jesus to wage war against me! I don’t want Jesus to wage war against any member of this congregation. We need to be praying for each other. Pray for your preacher. Pray for the elders. Pray for all of us. We need to repent. As God’s people, we need to be different. We need to turn away from sin immediately, or else suffer the consequences. And if any member is caught up in sin, all of us are held accountable (at least in some sense), especially if we tolerate it. And just a note here: This condemnation, this threat, is aimed at the church, not the world. He’s not condemning the world for being worldly here, but this passage is addressed to a congregation. And the message is: Do not compromise! Do not give in to a worldly way of thinking, and if you have, repent! Turn back.

And it’s the sword, the word of God, that wages war. If I’m sinning, I need the word of God to help make me feel miserable. This is why we need to be a part of a congregation that teaches and preaches the word of God accurately. This comes first. We can’t be taught wrong and somehow think we can be okay in the end. We want the word to convict us now instead of later. And so the command is to repent.

VI. As we come to the end, we come to the CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

And this promise is as real for us as it was for them, ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes [that’s the word NIKE, again], to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.”*** He promises hidden manna and a stone. We think of the manna God provided in the wilderness. Some of that was hidden away in the Ark of the Covenant as a reminder of God’s grace and faithfulness. But eventually, Jesus comes along, and he says, ***“I am the bread of life.”*** In fact, Jesus compares himself to manna (in John 6). Perhaps that’s the reference here. We do know that it’s a good promise. And if these people were having an issue eating food sacrificed to idols, Jesus is saying here, ***“If you overcome, I will give you some of the hidden manna.”*** Jesus takes care of his people.

The other promise is for a white stone with a name written on it. There are all kinds of theories on this – stones were used by juries to calculate verdicts (black for guilty, white for innocent), special stones were given to slaves who were freed from their slavery (almost as a certificate proving their freedom), stones were given as medals in the military and as awards at the games, stones were used to remember things – almost like a gravestone or an amulet of some kind. When I spent my first summer preaching full time in Wisconsin, I spent some time studying with a single mom, and her son gave me a rock. He might have been 2, but it was important to him, so I kept it. Maybe that’s what the Lord is talking about – a stone to remember. One of the leading theories is that stones were used almost as an admission ticket or a backstage pass, almost like an invitation to a wedding – it had your name on it and got you in the front door. I would emphasize the ***“new name.”*** God has a way of changing peoples’ names, doesn’t he? Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul, and so on. If we overcome, we are promised a new name of our own.

Conclusion:

The message to Pergamum (and to us here in Madison) is this: Even if you live in an evil place, stand strong. Hold on to the name of Jesus, but in the process, be sure not to tolerate what is false, either. Love what God loves, and hate what he hates, without compromise. Be Jesus. And if we’ve allowed the world to creep in, we need to repent, or else.

As we close, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the great and awesome God, creator of heaven and earth, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We come to you this morning, praising you for allowing us to study your word and your Son’s message to your people in Pergamum. We pray that we would hold on to your name, never embarrassed of our belief in your Son, but living lives of purity in a dark world. We pray today for opportunities to serve the world around us.

As we continue to lose those we know and love, we pray that you would allow those of us who remain to encourage and to help in any way we can. We’ve prayed for months for a vaccine, and we praise you today for good news. Be with those responsible for getting it out there. Be with those we know and love who are struggling with the virus. Thank you for qualified caregivers who continue to sacrifice to help others.

You've told us to pray for those in positions of authority, and so this morning we pray for our president. We pray that you will be with him over the next few days, that you would surround him with wise counsel, and that the transition this coming Wednesday would be smooth, if it is your will. As Mr. Trump leaves office, we pray that he would have time to reflect on spiritual matters, and that he would ultimately have an opportunity to hear, to believe, to repent, and to obey the gospel. We pray this for everyone, for we know you are a God who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. We pray that you would use us in any way possible to accomplish this mission.

We come to you in the name of your Son, Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com