

Revelation Studies
The Message to the Church in Pergamum
2:12-17

Introduction: In our Bibles this morning we are going to be in Revelation 2 looking at verses 12 – 17 where we see the message to the church in Pergamum. While you are turning there, let's review our memory passage. By way of background to this passage, the city of Pergamum was known primarily for four things. **First** of all, it was the seat of Roman power in Asia. We could call it the Washington, D.C. of Asia, so there was a very strong Roman presence there, both politically, militarily, and spiritually (it was the first city in Asia to build a temple to a living ruler). **Secondly**, it was known for its intellectualism. Pergamum had a library with 200,000 volumes in it, second only to Alexandria. **Third**, it had a strong medical presence. The cult of Asclepius, or the god of healing, had a stronghold in the city. People from all over the world would come to Pergamum to worship in the temple and look for miracles of healing. If you look at the symbol on Robert's or Kevin's EMT coat, you will see the sign of Aesclepius – a rod with a serpent curled around it. And **finally**, Pergamum was known for its altar to Zeus – a mammoth 40' tall altar. In addition to the temples to Zeus and Asclepius, Pergamum also had temples to Athena, Dionysus, and the emperor Augustus. So in a nutshell, Pergamum pulsed with idolatry.

So with that little bit of background, let's look at these six verses and see what God has in store for us today. Jesus starts His message to the church in Pergamum by referring to Himself in a rather curious way in verse 12, *“the One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this.”* This description is taken from 1:16, and we immediately think of how God's Word is “sharper than any two-edged sword,” but there more going on here than a simple description of Jesus as the Word of God. In the same way that America has a symbol – the bald eagle; and Canada has a symbol – the maple leaf; Rome had a symbol, and guess

what it was? The broad sword! It stood for their military might. The Roman army was unstoppable, it had a large garrison in Pergamum, soldiers were seen everywhere, and in that context Jesus says, "I am the one who has the sharp two-edged sword." And Jesus is going to invoke that power down in verse 16 when He tells the church the consequences of not repenting of their wrongdoing.

Now starting in verse 13, we see Jesus' assessment of the church, and He starts by reminding them that He knows the difficulty of their setting. *"I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is."* This is a very apt description of Pergamum. Jesus isn't referring to a literal temple with a literal throne in it where there was a statue of Satan. He isn't referring to Satan worship, He is referencing who stands behind all the idolatry and the false religion that was so prevalent in Pergamum. It was Satanic in its source. Satan's throne is where Satan has dominion. It is where he is reigning. And his rulership is manifested in a variety of ways. It doesn't matter if it emperor worship, Zeus worship, Aesclepius worship, Dionysys worship, Athena worship, or even the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolatians as we are going to see in a few verses, they have a common source, the enemy of our souls who wants to destroy us.

And as we see in the rest of verse 13, Satan was successful in his attempts. Jesus goes on in His assessment to say that the church was to be commended because *"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."* We don't know anything about Antipas other than what is recorded here, but he was one of those who "did not love his own life, even unto death," as our memory passage puts it. He did not count his own life as dear unto himself. He understood the temporary nature of human life and the permanent nature of heavenly reality. And so the church is commended because they were faithful to Jesus, even in the face this level of threat.

So as we think about Jesus' assessment of this church, they are commended for their resolve. But verse 14 continues the assessment and we see that there was a very serious problem in the church. *"But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teachings of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel."*

What is this a reference to? Well, Balaam is an OT character (Num. 22-23) who is known for his insidious damage to the nation of Israel as they were making their way to the promised land. What happens in this OT story is that the nation of Moab had hired Balaam to curse the Israelites so that when they went to war with them, the Israelites would be powerless to defend themselves. Well, Satan's overt attack on God's people through Balaam's curse was thwarted when God providentially intervened and made Balaam incapable of cursing the nation (remember the story of Balaam's donkey?). Now when that happened, Satan changed his methodology. He isn't stupid!

So, Satan switched from the heavy handed, overt, blatant attack, to something more refined, something with much more finesse. According to Num. 31, he had Balaam advise the Moabites to invite the Israelites to a feast. Sounds innocent, doesn't it? It's just a meal, and you can almost hear the leaders of the nation rationalizing it by saying, "We can introduce them to the true God by befriending them." So here we have Jehovah worshippers having dinner with Baal worshippers. And there was food, and there was music, and there were loose women, and you know how the story ends. The next thing we know about Israel is that they are worshipping Baal and fornicating with the Moabites.

That is what Jesus is referring to in v. 14 where He talks about this stumbling-block that Balaam put before the Israelites so that they *"ate things offered to idols and committed acts of immorality."* Jesus' point is that the same thing was going on in the church in Pergamum. There were some people in the church in Pergamum who were

participants in the pagan, idolatrous feasts dedicated to Zeus, and Athena, and Dionysus and Aesclepius! And apparently it went beyond simply participating in the feasts and eating food that had been offered to these idols, they were also participating in the sexual activities that accompanied these festivals!

Now in verse 15, continuing the negative assessment, Jesus mentions the Nicolaitians. *“Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”* We talked about the Nicolaitans in an earlier message, but essentially, they were no different from the Balaamites. They taught that there was nothing wrong with participating in these pagan feasts, and that participating in the immorality that accompanied the festivals was fine.

This is jaw-dropping when you think about it. How could a church that is being commended for their fidelity to the name of Christ, even in the face of martyrdom, at the same time openly engage in such egregious, sinful behavior? Well, at least two things come to mind.

1. They were obviously misapplying Paul’s teaching on the nature of idols and Christian liberty in 1 Cor. 8.
2. They were misapplying Paul’s teaching of grace and forgiveness in Rom. 5 (“where sin abounded, grace did much more abound”) and 7 and many other places.
- 3.

So as we think about the church in Pergamum, to put it bluntly, this was a bipolar church! If Ephesus was the loveless church, and Smyrna was the persecuted church, Pergamum had lost touch with reality. As Paul puts it in 2 Cor. 6, there is no partnership between righteousness and lawlessness, there is no fellowship between light and darkness, there is no harmony between Christ and Belial, and there is no agreement between the temple of

the living God and idols. Pergamum was in desperate need of a thorough purging of this bad doctrine.

So Jesus tells them in verse 16, *“repent, therefore, or I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of my mouth.”* There are several things to note about this. First of all, the imagery that Jesus evokes is designed to jolt them out of their compromised state. There is a definite allusion to the power of the Roman army in this verse. The second thing to note is the recipients of Jesus’ command to repent. Did you catch that the Balaamites aren’t commanded to repent? Jesus doesn’t address them. The church is commanded to repent of their toleration of the bad doctrine of the Balaamites and the Nicolaitians. The third thing to note is that if the church doesn’t repent, what are the consequences? The Balaamites and the Nicolaitians are going to be disciplined. This is rather curious how Jesus sets this up. The point Jesus is making is that if the orthodox part of the church doesn’t deal with the Balaamites and Nicolaitians, He was going to step in and do it Himself. And it is a “fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!” I think there is a powerful lesson being taught here.

If a parent doesn’t discipline his wayward child, who suffers the most for that lack of being disciplined? The child does. We paddle our children for stealing candy from the store, because if we don’t, they may end up in Cossackie Correctional Facility really suffering for our negligence. A bottom that is sore for 20 minutes is much to be preferred over a 10 year prison sentence. That is the concept Jesus is invoking in this church – deal with the Balaamites before I step in with the big guns. It’s the loving thing to do.

Now when we get to verse 17 we see the familiar words of challenge, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* There was a point Jesus was making to the church in Pergamum, and He’s making it this morning to us. We need to

hear what He says. We need to take doctrine seriously. We need to deal with false doctrine lovingly. If we don't, the consequences are dire.

And then the promise to the overcomer – *“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.”* Unfortunately, we have no conclusive idea what these two promises entail. If you read the commentaries, they will tell you that this promise of hidden manna could mean five different things. And the promise of the white stone could mean any one of seven different things. The best I can tell is that the hidden manna is a promise of some kind of spiritual sustenance. Manna was what God used to sustain his people in the wilderness wanderings, and it was a type of bread. In the NT, we know that Jesus referred to Himself as the “bread of life” and that it was necessary to “eat His flesh” if we wanted to have that eternal life. So when you put these concepts together it looks like Jesus is promising the overcomer that He will sustain him spiritually when things get difficult.

The white stone with a new name written on it probably refers to a judicial act. In those days jurors were given both a white stone and a black stone when it came time to pass sentence. If they put the black stone in the container, that was a vote of “guilty,” but if it was a white stone, it was a vote of “innocent.” So it looks like this is the promise of acquittal, or exoneration that results in us spending eternity in heaven.

These are great promises to keep in mind and we can see how they would bring comfort to the church in Pergamum. But what about for you and me this morning? What can we learn from this message to the church in Pergamum? To put it simply, Jesus demands complete allegiance. You can't keep one foot in the church and one foot in the world. Sitting on the fence like this earned this church a strong word of rebuke from Jesus. Compromising with the world always has disastrous results, so when we make the

choice to follow Jesus, it is an all or nothing choice. And when you think about it, it really shouldn't be that hard of a choice for us to make in light of what Jesus did for us. Jesus left His home in heaven. Phil. 2 tells us He didn't consider His equality with God as something to grasp on to. He gave His all for us, He died for us, so isn't it really the least we can do to give Him our complete allegiance? We don't want to be Balaamites. We don't want to be Nicolaitians.