



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
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**What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches:
But I Have a Few Things against You
Revelation 2:12-17**

For the past several weeks now, we've been on a journey through the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. So far we've examined John's vision of the sender of these letters, the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ, and looked at the letters to the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna.

The letter to Ephesus commended the church for their faithfulness in teaching, belief, and practice, but called them to repent for having abandoned the love they had at first. They were believing right, but they were also to love right.

The letter to the church at Smyrna was all commendation and encouragement. Jesus told them that he knew their situation and how faithful they had been, and that there was no need to fear death, since they would receive the crown of life.

Now we come to the third letter, this one to the church at Pergamum. Listen to what the risen Lord said to them through John . . .

¹² "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight 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, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

The church at Pergamum

The only places the Bible mentions the church at Pergamum are here and in the list of the seven churches in Revelation 1:11. Nor is it mentioned in other early Christian writings, unless it's in reference to the teachings of the Nicolaitans that are mentioned in this letter.

We do know a little about the city.¹ While Ephesus and Smyrna were leading cities of Asia economically, Pergamum was the Roman capital of the province of Asia. Like those cities, it was also a center of emperor worship, and in A.D. 29 built and dedicated a temple “to the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma”—the Augustus who was Caesar when Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:1-3).

By the time Revelation was written in the mid-90s of the first century, the worship of the emperor had become a test of loyalty to the Roman Empire. To refuse to take part was considered high treason.

But Caesar wasn't the only supposed deity in this city of about 120,000 people. There was a hill where there were many temples to pagan deities. At the very top was a huge altar dedicated to the god Zeus. The configuration of these structures almost resembled a throne.

Along with these the serpent-god of healing, Asclepius, was worshiped in Pergamum. The medical priests of Asclepius would lay the sick who came from all around in his temples in hopes that the non-poisonous snakes there would touch the sick and heal them. That's where the snake imagery in medical symbols today comes from.

The letter from Jesus

With this conglomeration of pagan and emperor worship, is it any wonder that Jesus tells the church at Pergamum that he knows that they live “where Satan has his throne” (2:13)?² Yet they had been true to his name. They did not renounce their faith in Jesus, even when his faithful witness Antipas was put to death in Pergamum. And Jesus reiterates it—“where Satan lives” (2:13).

A word about the word “witness”—the Greek word is the word we get our word *martyr* from, you know, someone who dies for what he or she believes in. And that's what Antipas did. Though either the Roman authorities or an angry mob tried to force him to deny Jesus, he wouldn't, and so he was put to death. He died rather than deny Christ. You see, by this time, the word “witness” was taking on the connotation that to die rather than deny Jesus was the *ultimate* witness. Antipas had already given his, and others were willing to do the same.

And yet despite all that ultimate faithfulness and witness, Jesus said to them, “But I have a few things against you . . .” (2:14, RSV). What in the world? What more could Jesus be asking from them?

While the church as a whole had been faithful against outside pressure, they were not dealing with a very serious internal pressure. There were some in the church at Pergamum who were holding “to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality” (2:14). He identified this with “the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (2:15). Jesus had already commended the Ephesian church for hating “the practices of the Nicolaitans,” saying that he also hated their practices (2:6).

Do you remember the story of Balaam in Numbers 22-24? He's the prophet that Balak, the king of Moab, hired to curse the Israelites when they were camped in Moab across the Jordan River from Jericho. As the story goes, every time Balaam tried to pronounce a curse on Israel, a blessing came out. It happened three times, then for good measure, Balaam blessed them again!

¹ These commentaries have been helpful in my interpretation of this text: Morris Ashcraft, “Revelation” in *the Broadman Bible Commentary*; David Aune, “Revelation” in *The Word Biblical Commentary*; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*; Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*; Charles Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*.

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

Now Numbers doesn't tell us this directly, but Jewish tradition holds that what happened next in Numbers 25 was the result of advice that Balaam gave Balak. The Moabites invited the Israelites to join them for their sacrificial meals to their gods, particularly the Baal of Peor. Those who accepted the invitation ended up worshiping Baal and engaging in immoral acts with the Moabites. The LORD was angry with them, and ordered the execution of those who had participated. He also sent a plague among the people that killed 24,000 people. I'd say God took this offense very seriously, wouldn't you?

You see, idolatry and immorality often, maybe even most often, go together. Ultimately, idolatry is making the temporary physical world around us what is most important to us. That leads to a rejection of God and his authority over us and his commands to us, which are always for our good.

Now did you notice how Jesus identified himself in this letter? "These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword" (2:12). He identified himself that way for a reason. Just as God dealt severely with the sins of the Israelites Balaam led astray, so Jesus said he would deal with the sins of the Christians in Pergamum who refused to repent. "Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (2:16).

Again he called on them to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, and promised a reward to the one who overcomes. He used a twofold image—sharing in the hidden manna and receiving a white stone or pebble with a new name written on it that only the one who receives it knows.

What's the significance of these images? Commentaries on Revelation propose that the hidden manna harkens back to the Jewish belief that when the temple fell, either an angel or the prophet Jeremiah removed the ark of the covenant from the temple and hid it. One of the items that had been put in the ark at one time was a golden container with some of the manna that God had given the Israelites in the wilderness. By the first century, some Jews believed that when the Messiah came, the participants in the great messianic banquet would share in eating this hidden manna. So to be given some of the hidden manna means to share in the great messianic banquet—what John calls in Revelation 19:9 "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (RSV). Christians in Pergamum were being pressured by the pagans around them and by the Nicolaitans within the church to participate in the pagan feasts as they worshiped their idol gods. Those who refused to participate in those feasts would share in the Lord's great messianic feast.

The stone Jesus speaks of here was really a white pebble-sized stone. According to a number of scholars, stones like this were used for several different purposes. Juries used them to vote—a white stone for innocent and a black stone for guilty. White stones were also used as admission tickets—they were often given to victorious athletes to allow their admission to free meals and such. Similar stones were also used as amulets or charms for magical purposes. I think that the second use of these stones—as admission tickets—is probably what the risen Lord was referring to here. It's not clear whether the new name written on the stone is a divine name or a new name that God gives to the one who receives the stone. But it would be the assurance that the one who is victorious in the contest for Christ and against Satan would be admitted to the heavenly feast!

The church at Jonesboro Heights

So what is the risen Lord saying to us at Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church through this letter to the church at Pergamum?

Jesus calls us to absolute faithfulness to him in both our worship and our walk! This is serious business—so serious that he declares that he will come and bring judgment on those who claim to be his followers but participate in idolatry and immorality! And he holds the church the offenders are a part of responsible for allowing it to go on unchallenged and unchecked. When he calls on *the church* at Pergamum to repent, the risen Lord is saying, “If you don’t deal with them, I will.”

Churches, especially Baptist churches, used to hold their members lovingly accountable, you know. They understood that idolatry and immorality were like malignant growths on the body of Christ, so they lovingly sought to correct and bring to repentance those who had gone astray. They followed the New Testament pattern of discipline that focused on redemption rather than retribution and safeguarded the unity of Christ’s church by dealing lovingly but firmly with those who persisted in behavior that was divisive or immoral, refusing to repent. The hope was always that the congregation’s loving discipline, which sometimes went to the point of excluding the offender from membership, would ultimately help them see the error of their ways, the damage they were doing to themselves and others, and the reproach they were bringing on Christ’s church, so they would repent and be restored to the fellowship.

And then something happened in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Church discipline became petty and overbearing. People were dismissed from membership for relatively minor offenses. It became so ridiculous that churches backed away from discipline. This reluctance was soon joined by the movement toward absolute individual autonomy in our society, the belief that no one has the right to tell anyone else what they ought to do or how they ought to live. Everything was to be determined by oneself—you know, as the book of Judges describes the sad state of Israel in Judges 21:25 (NRSV): “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

And so churches ceased to exercise any loving discipline. And members who were worshiping the idols of self-centeredness and materialism and popularity and worldly pleasure were allowed to do so and still be considered members in good standing. Immorality of all kinds was left unchallenged—except to gossip about it, thus adding to the sin and disunity within the congregation. And though churches may have seemingly prospered outwardly, inwardly they were becoming weaker and weaker, as the twin cancers of idolatry and immorality, especially sexual immorality, continued to take their toll.

And Jesus says to *us*—because these messages are to *all* his churches—“Repent therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”

And so today, as your pastor, I plead with you—if you profess to follow Jesus as your Lord, and you are not being absolutely loyal to him in your worship and your walk, *repent!* Confess your sin and change your ways by yielding yourself to Christ completely so he can live out his life of faithfulness through you!

Anything or anyone you put before him is your idol—your pleasure, your possessions, your job, your pride, your family, your self—if it’s more important to you than your relationship with God through Christ, then it has become your god.

If you take the good gift that God gave to be enjoyed between a man and woman who are committed to each other for life in the holy bonds of the covenant of marriage and use it outside those bonds—whether before, during, or after marriage—if you use this gift contrary to God’s purpose, it is *sin*. It is *rebellion* against God’s purpose. And it has consequences that affect the whole person—emotionally, sometimes physically, and most of all, spiritually.

So for your own sake, for the sake of those who love you and will love you, for the sake of the body of Christ of which you claim to be a part, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ who loved you and shed his own blood to redeem you, *repent!* Turn back to Christ. Yield yourself—body, soul, mind, and heart—to him as your Lord, and he will enable you to overcome as you follow him. Be done with idolatry and immorality, and follow Jesus fully. To do otherwise has consequences you don't want to experience—for you and for the church to which you belong!

Now lest someone say, “What you're saying sounds so harsh and judgmental,” let me say that sometimes the most loving thing that a pastor or a church can do is to pronounce the judgment that God pronounces on sin, so that those who hear it can repent! After all, what's more loving—to try to stop someone from stepping into the path of a truck, or to let them go on without warning and be seriously injured or killed?

“Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”³

†MEG

³ My translation.