

Church At The End Of The World

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

(Revelation 1:7 ESV)

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

(Revelation 2:10 ESV)

The Church In Pergamum

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Revelation 2:12-17

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Revelation 2:12; that's on page 1029 in your pew Bibles. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that there is a general pattern to most of these 7 letters. Most of the letters begin with an introduction where Jesus is introduced as the author and presented with some of the symbolism that was given back in chapter 1. Then there is a commendation, where he tells them what they're doing right, this is followed usually by an accusation where he identifies some things they are doing wrong, then there is a exhortation where he tells them what they need to do to fix whatever is wrong and then finally there is a word of promise where he encourages them with what lies ahead for all those who are faithful. This letter follows that pattern exactly and so we will read it according to those categories. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.
13 " '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. 14 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. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and 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 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.' (Revelation 2:12–17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

The Introduction

In this letter Jesus is introduced as:

him who has the sharp two-edged sword. (Revelation 2:12 ESV)

Now, its been a few weeks but you will probably remember that description from our time in Revelation 1. There we are told that John saw one like a Son of Man moving among the lampstands. He was:

clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. 14 The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, 15 his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, **from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword**, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (Revelation 1:13–16 ESV)

The two edged sword here represents the piercing, dividing and at times even destroying Word of God. The Word of God is often referred to in this way. The Apostle Paul for example said in Ephesians 6:

take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:17 ESV)

The author of Hebrews said something very similar, he said:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12 ESV)

The Word of God is a weapon that cuts through deceit, deception and falsehood. It tells the truth and it proceeds from Christ. It is a friend to all those who love the truth but it is an enemy to all who oppose the truth. That is in fact the choice that Jesus is offering to this church. He is telling them that they can either use the Word of God to help them cut through deception and error or they can face the Word of God in the hand of the Christ who comes to judge the world. That is the threat that Jesus delivers personally to this church in verse 16 – and it is also part of the general conclusion to this letter as a whole. In Revelation 19 John says:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ... He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.... From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. (Revelation 19:11–16 ESV)

Alright, so Jesus introduces himself in this letter to the church in Pergamum as the source of all truth and discernment and also as the one who will judge all people by the Word of his mouth at the end of the world. That's who Jesus is and that is an important truth to wrestle with as we begin to unpack the rest of this letter.

He begins the body of the letter first of all by commending them for their faithfulness and endurance.

The Commendation

He says:

'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. (Revelation 2:13 ESV)

Pergamum was not an easy place to be a Christian. It was the political and religious centre of the entire region. The Proconsul of the Province had his official residence there and it was the first city in the region to erect a temple to a Roman Emperor as a god. The city was known as *neochoros* – temple warden. They were known as the keepers of pagan temples. This was “Mecca”, this was “Medina” this was the centre of pagan worship in Asia Minor and as a result the Christian community felt constantly under siege.

It was a hard place to hold minority views and yet, they were known by the Head of the Church for their faithfulness and endurance. They held fast their loyalty to Jesus Christ under tremendous pressure. They would not deny him and they would not dishonour him by naming Caesar as Lord – their endurance was remarkable and for one of them at least, it had come at a considerable cost.

Jesus mentions “Antipas” as a person who had paid the ultimate price. Now I mentioned to you that there was no formal persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire in this province at this time. This letter was written around AD 93 and the first formal persecution we know of in this area happened in AD 112. Therefore this execution of Antipas was likely something of a one off event. Scholars suggest that he was probably identified as a serial nonconformist. He wouldn't

sacrifice at the many festivals, he never worshipped the pagan gods and he never hailed Caesar as Lord. Some even suggest that this isn't his real name, that Jesus is giving him a new name – an honorific title in calling him Antipas, because Antipas, actually means in Greek “against all”. He stood against the FULL TIDE of public opinion and momentum and yet held fast. If it wasn't his real name it should have been. He was a serial nonconformist and he is commended for being so by the Lord.

Not everyone in the church, however, was as consistent or as steadfast as brother Antipas. That brings us to the accusation in verses 14-15.

The Accusation

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. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. (Revelation 2:14–15 ESV)

Most scholars understand that we are not talking about two groups of people here, but one group under two designations. The general opinion is that there is a group of false teachers – or a group of so called Christians who are propagating false teachings – who were known in the first century as Nicolaitans and who Jesus here compares to the false prophet Balaam. Jesus is saying “The Nicolaitans are like Balaam who caused Israel to sin”.

The story of Balaam comes from the Book of Numbers. Balaam was a prophet for hire and he was hired by Balak to put a curse on the people of God. However, each time he opened his mouth to pronounce a curse God filled his mouth with a word of blessing. Balaam however came up with another way to cause Israel to stumble. He advised Balak – the King of the Moab – to send pretty young girls into the camp of the Israelites and to use them to lure the Israelite men to their pagan celebrations which involved sacrifice to their gods and sex with young girls. And the plan worked brilliantly! Several young men participated in the festival and had sex with Midianite women – one man even tried to bring his girl back into the camp. Do you remember that story?

When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the chamber and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. (Numbers 25:7–8 ESV)

Now, New Testament readers expect that Phinehas will be rebuked for his excessive zeal. He killed two people with a spear in broad daylight – surely that is a serious over reaction. And yet look at what God says next:

And the LORD said to Moses, 11 “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. 12 Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, 13 and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.’” (Numbers 25:10–13 ESV)

God didn’t rebuke this ANTIPAS – this SERIAL NONCONFORMIST – on the contrary he declares him eternally blessed! But you say, Pastor, hold it now, that was in the Old Testament. God is a Christian now and things are different. But look at verse 16 – Jesus tells them to repent of their tolerance and he warns them that if they don’t:

I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. (Revelation 2:16 ESV)

If you don’t repent of the sin of Balaam I will come and be as Phinehas to you! In no uncertain terms this church is being rebuked by Jesus for their failure to practice church discipline. They have brought sin into the camp. They are permitting people to do immoral things and to practice forms of pagan religion IN THE CAMP OF THE LORD. That is the issue.

These people believe the truth but they have provided a safe haven for false prophets who are leading God’s people into sin and it has to stop. My friends, listen to me, it is not enough to believe the truth – you also have to REJECT and RESIST error.

Jesus is not a fan of polite passivity. Error is serious business and if it is not confronted than it summons the wrath of God upon the church.

Obviously this is serious business and so Jesus tells them what they need to do in order to address this error.

The Exhortation

He tells them simply in verse 16:

repent. (Revelation 2:16 ESV)

Turn around. Stop what you are doing and do the opposite.

Jesus apparently, isn't much into therapy. He doesn't give them a 12 step plan or suggest 7 habits for effective living he just says STOP WHAT YOU ARE DOING, TURN AROUND, GO BACK AND DO THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT YOU DID BEFORE. You let them, now kick them out! You tolerated this behaviour, now stop tolerating this behaviour.

Sometimes its as simple as that. Sometimes we over complicate things a great deal. We want to point out why our situation is a little more complicated perhaps than Jesus realizes. We have some particular circumstances, we are operating in a particularly difficult social environment. But Jesus has already anticipated that objection and he has cut them off at the pass. He began the letter by saying:

'I know where you dwell (Revelation 2:13 ESV)

I know your environment. I understand the social context. That doesn't excuse stupid and sinful behaviour. Stop it. Turn around and go back.

If Genesis 3 teaches us anything it is that human beings will always try to excuse their bad behaviour by pointing at other people or by pointing at particular difficulties within their environment. "This woman that you gave to me"; "this snake that you let in my garden" – these are the reasons that I have done what I was told not to do. But God isn't buying it. He wasn't buying it then, he isn't buying it now. You can't blame your environment – social context is not a get out of jail free card. At the end of the day, sin is sin, stupid is stupid and you should stop. Repent. Thus saith the Lord.

The Promise

Now, as a Good Shepherd, as a Good Pastor, Jesus ends his address with an encouraging word of promise. He says in verse 17:

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.' (Revelation 2:17 ESV)

Christians conquer by not compromising. They hold fast to the faith once for all delivered to the saints even against constant political, social and religious pressure. To those who conquer there is a reward. That reward is here described by use of three symbols.

The first thing Jesus says is that he will give to these people some of the hidden manna. This imagery is likely intended to communicate two things. According to the Bible there was a golden urn in the Ark of the Covenant that preserved some of the manna with which God kept the Israelites alive during their sojourn in the desert. The Ark of the Covenant was lost at some point in Israel's history but John says in Revelation 11 that the ark is now hidden in heaven. He says:

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. (Revelation 11:19 ESV)

So there is some hidden manna in heaven that will be shared with those who persevere upon the earth. Long story short, "hidden manna" is likely just another way of saying "eternal life". You will go to heaven. The reward for holding fast under duress, against the pressure of culture all the way to the end is abundant life with God in the eternal kingdom forever.

The second thing that is likely referenced under this symbol is the correct object of our enduring faith. Jesus compared believing in him to eating the manna from heaven in John 6. He said:

"I am the bread that came down from heaven." (John 6:41 ESV)

If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. (John 6:51 ESV)

So eating the bread is here equivalent to believing in Jesus and holding that belief steadfastly until the end. The kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

The second symbol in this promise has to do with a white stone. Now scholars are less sure about this but most of them think that it has to do with the stones that were used in the Roman legal system. When a jury was deciding upon the guilt or innocence of a defendant they indicated guilt

by submitting a black stone and they indicated innocence by submitting a white stone. So Jesus here may be saying that steadfast faith will result in a justified legal standing before God. We are saved by faith – and the faith that saves us is by definition an ENDURING FAITH so that may be what Jesus is saying here.

It may also refer to an admission ticket that was also quite common in the Roman world. You might gain entrance to a play or a debate by handing in a stamped white stone – so Jesus may be saying that you will gain entrance to the Messianic Banquet in the eternal kingdom by means of your persevering faith.

It could mean either of those things; or both.

The third symbol has to do with the name that is written on the white stone. Names in the Bible, indicate intimate knowledge. When Moses asked to see God's glory he was told God's Name. So for a Christian to be given a stone with a new name on it likely intends to refer to that final change of identity and that eternal gift of intimacy that is given to the believer at the moment of death or at the return of the Lord.

Listen for example to how John speaks about that day in 1 John 3:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are... Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:1–2 ESV)

John says that we are God's children now but there is a new and glorious identity waiting for us in the heavens and it will be given to us when he appears or when we SEE HIM. Same idea here. This symbol communicates newness, total transformation and relational intimacy, with God, in Christ, forever. This is the gift that is given to everyone who perseveres in faith.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 2:17 ESV)

Reflecting And Responding

Now that line – verse 17 – is an obvious call for spiritual reflection upon the truths that we have

just discussed. The Bible doesn't intend MERELY to provide Christian information, it intends to inspire Christian reflection upon those spiritual truths. It is wonderful to know what Jesus means by hidden manna but it is far more important that we think about whether or not we stand to inherit whatever it is that he's talking about. Verse 17 is commending a time of reflection and response so that is where I want to end in our time together this morning.

The meaning of the text seems pretty clear. These people are basically the exact opposite of the people in Ephesus. That's not just my opinion, that is pretty standard analysis. G.K. Beale for example says:

"The problem is the opposite of that in Ephesus. An overemphasis on internal doctrinal purity can lead to a lack of concern for the outside world, whereas a deemphasis can lead to overidentification with the world."¹

Obviously there is a ditch on either side here. The Ephesians were so obsessed with orthodoxy that they actually stopped showing the love of God to the world. The church in Pergamum did the opposite. They let too much of the world into the church. So just like we needed to wrestle with the issue of love after reading the letter to Ephesus so here we need to wrestle with the issue of intolerance having read this letter to Pergamum.

Specifically, I think we need to ask this question:

To Whom Should We Be Intolerant?

A careful reading of the text seems to indicate a two-part answer. First of all it seems that the Lord expects Christians to be intolerant towards:

1. People who deny the essential truths about Jesus Christ

That seems to be the point behind Jesus saying:

you hold fast **my name**, and you did not deny **my faith** even in the days of Antipas (Revelation 2:13 ESV)

You cannot be a Christian – you cannot claim shelter inside the Christian church – if you deny

¹ G.K. Beale, *The Book Of Revelation NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 248.

the essential truths concerning the person of Jesus Christ. Commenting on this text John Stott says:

“The irreducible minimum of Christian belief is that Jesus of Nazareth is the unique Son of God and that He died to be the Saviour of the world. I may not fully understand either statement (the incarnation and the atonement...), but if I want to call myself a Christian I must believe both. I must not only believe them intellectually; I must act on them.”²

If you want to call yourself a Christian you have to believe in and trust in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and Lord – it would be very hard to argue with that. If you can't agree with that then you can't call yourself a Christian and you can't expect to be admitted into membership in a Christian church.

However, while that is very obvious, that doesn't appear to be the specific problem in Pergamum. They were commended for being intolerant and inflexible with respect to their Christology. But there was another group of people that they were tolerating that they should not have been. According to the text they were tolerating:

2. People who deny the moral and ethical teachings of the Bible

That's what the Nicolaitans were doing! That is what it means to follow the error of Balaam! It means to have good doctrine but to permit bad practice. It means to affirm the central truths of the Christian faith but to deny the foundational teachings of the Bible with respect to holiness and morality. Sound familiar?

Again, John Stott identifies this as the second irreducible Christian minimum. He says:

“The second central Christian truth which cannot at any price be sacrificed is an ethical truth concerning holiness. The Christian faith in its fundamentals concerns the person and work of Christ on the one hand and the life of righteousness on the other.”³

You don't get to call yourself a Christian and you don't get to shelter within the Christian camp if you say you believe in Jesus but you advocate for immoral and unrighteous behaviour. Let me bring that down to street level. Those in our day who call themselves Christians and yet who

² John Stott, *What Christ Thinks Of The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 55.

³ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks Of The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 58.

openly affirm same sex marriage are modern day Nicolaitans. They are Balaamites and they are not to be tolerated in the church.

Now, we can and we should and we must be loving and gracious towards those in the world who hold wrong and destructive views on such things. This text is NOT telling us to be judgmental towards unbelievers. Let's be so clear about that. The Apostle Paul said:

For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? (1 Corinthians 5:12 ESV)

To be very clear then, this text is about who we can bring into the camp and call a Christian – it is not about how we go outside the camp in order to minister to non-Christians. Outside the camp we should be gentle and loving and humble and engaging. Inside the camp, however, we must be clear, we must be vigilant and we must if necessary be rigorously intolerant. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot have the favour of Rome and the favour of God. If you compromise to avoid the sword of Rome then you will inevitably face the sword of Christ. That's what Jesus is saying in this text and we need to hear it again in our day.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 2:17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Let's pray together.