

The church at Pergamum * Revelation 2:12-17

January 21, 2024 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

When I was a little kid, I went a couple days a week to a pre-school program called 'Stepping Stones.' We'd play games and sing songs and I'm pretty sure they had a 'toy borrowing' program so you could 'borrow one of their toys' and take it home. I always thought that was cool.

Now I have a memory from that time - I don't know if it was something that they wrote down or if it was just something that they told my mom - but I remember them saying about me 'he's a lover, not a fighter.'

That's me, a lover, not a fighter.

Which I think has predisposed me to valuing compromise. (What can I say, I'm a lover, not a fighter!) I would much rather find common ground with another person so that we both get what we want, even if it costs us a little, than fight with them to either get nothing in the end or everything at their expense. Generally speaking, I think that compromise is a good thing.

The one exception to that though, where compromise can actually be dangerous, is when it comes to our faith. When we dilute our commitment to Jesus by letting the world have a bigger influence on us than it should. When we start to ask 'what can I get away with and still be a faithful follower of Jesus?' rather than 'what am I doing and is it honouring to Him?'

Every so often I need that reminder – Don't compromise but instead hold on to Jesus with all my heart and soul and mind and strength –

And that's exactly what the letter we're going to look at this morning is. Jesus' letter to Pergamum in Revelation 2 is a call to avoid compromise and to keep the faith, no matter the cost. Turn with me to Revelation 2, we'll look together at it, starting in verse 12, Jesus' letter to the church at Pergamum.

Just like last week, let me read it to you and then we'll go through and unpack it. So, verse 12 –

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 (Rev 2:12-17 NIV).

This is Jesus' letter to the church at Pergamum and His revelation to the Church at large.

So once again, let me put on my ancient travel agent hat and say that Pergamum was another lovely Mediterranean town about a hundred (113) km north of Smyrna. It was a major religious centre in what we now call Turkey with major shrines to Zeus and Athena and a bunch of other Greek gods and Pergamum was also a major centre of emperor worship in the Roman Empire. Many Roman emperors insisted that they be worshiped as gods and there was a major temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus there in Pergamum.ⁱ

There was also a church in Pergamum – not a building but a group of people - and through John in exile on Patmos, Jesus wrote to this church.

Now when He wrote to Ephesus and Smyrna, He addressed them in pretty positive terms. Revelation 2:1 – to the church at Ephesus, He calls Himself essentially 'the One who walks in your midst to help you' and 2:8 – to the church at Smyrna, He calls Himself the First and the Last, the One who died and rose again – and we talked last week about what kind of comfort that would have been to the people at Smyrna.

Look though at how Jesus describes Himself to the church at Pergamum. Verse 12:

12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword."

Now when we hear 'double-edged sword,' we tend to think metaphorically of something that can hurt you just as much as it can hurt your enemy but that's not what the people in Pergamum would have thought of. They hear 'double-edged sword' – literally a 'romphea' - and they think 'judgment.' They think 'justice.' The romphea was the perfect sword for hacking and slashing and executing judgment – and people in the circumstances called for it.

So as Jesus is addressing the church at Pergamum, He's describing Himself as an agent of justice. He comes to them holding the sword of judgment.

And here's what He has to say. Verse 13 –

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.

There's lots of scholarly debate about that line 'where Satan has his throne.' On the highest point in Pergamum there was this altar to Zeus complete with snakes carved into it that could be seen for miles around; a lot of people think that that might be what Jesus is referring out.ⁱⁱ Other people point out that John often equates the Roman Empire with Satan in Revelation and they had their big temple for emperor worship there in Pergamumⁱⁱⁱ so it may be that the 'throne of Satan' refers to Rome.

It seems just as likely to me though that Jesus is speaking metaphorically and saying 'this is a home to Satan's power.' Pergamum was home to all these pagan gods, it was home to the emperor's temple; pull back the curtain and who's behind it all? It's Satan. This is where Satan 'has his throne'/is especially active and he has blinded the eyes of the people in Pergamum and tricked them into worshiping idols rather than the true God.

And the church in Pergamum, well, they're living in Satan's backyard. They are living in the most inhospitable place that you can think of for Christians – they're in the shadow of Satan's throne – and yet look how they're doing.

Verse 13 again – 'I know where you live – where Satan has his throne – where Satan lives. And yet you remain true to my name' (literally, you 'hold fast') to My Name.' Jesus knows that they are deep in enemy territory and even so, they remain true to Him. Jesus knows it and He applauds them for it.

The church in Pergamum held fast to Jesus, even when their members have been put to death for following Jesus. We don't know anything else about this Antipas guy in verse 13, but when push came to shove, he decided he'd rather die than deny Jesus and again Jesus says 'I know what's happening and precious in my sight is the blood of my saints' (Psalm 116:15). Jesus will repay His steadfast people with eternal life. And He will repay their oppressors with eternal death. I think that's implicit in Jesus' description of Himself as the Judge wielding the sword.

But I don't think that sword is only for the pagan people in Pergamum. It's for some in the church at Pergamum church too.

Look at verse 14:

14 Nevertheless, (despite your willing-to-die faithfulness in Satan's backyard) 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 [We don't know a lot about the Nicolaitans, but we're pretty sure that they had the same sort of openness to immorality and idolatry as the Balaamites].

Now this kind of blows my mind. There are people at the church in Pergamum who are willing to die for their faith. Antipas laid down his life rather than throw Jesus under the bus. But there are also people in that same church who are out there doing things that would make your

grandma blush. Sure, they'd be in church on Sunday morning but they'd be nursing an awful hangover from the idol feast the night before.

Jesus the Judge writes to Pergamum and says 'Not in my Church.' We don't want compromise like that.

Now Jesus here refers specifically to something that happened in the life of His people Israel. I don't know if you'll remember back to the book of Numbers – Balaam and his talking donkey. You can read the whole thing in Numbers 22 to 25 or so. Long story short, Israel's enemy King Balak of Moab wanted to destroy Israel and so he hired this sorcerer-type guy, Balaam, to curse Israel on his behalf. God wouldn't let him though and Balaam actually ended up *blessing* Israel instead.

But here's the thing. Balaam still wanted to get paid and so I think he took a note from Satan and said 'ok, if I can't overcome them spiritually, then I'll undermine them materially.' And he said to the king 'why don't you see if you can seduce some of the Israelites?' and before you know it, Numbers 31:16, the Israelites turned away from the LORD into immorality and idolatry all because of the counsel of Balaam. He got them to compromise their faith, maybe justifying to themselves 'if we're God's people, it doesn't matter how we act.'

And now here in the church at Pergamum, 'believers' were doing the same thing. Their faith was right but their actions were garbage. They were faithful on Sunday morning, not so much that night. They were compromising their faith.

I think Douglas Connelly captures it well when he says "The 'teaching of Balaam' in the church at Pergamum said 'As long as you believe in God, as long as you go to church, as long as you keep up some superficial commitment as a Christian, you can live any way you want.'"iv They went to the same feasts as the pagans with their idols. They took part in their gluttony and orgies (which literally happened). They did the same things as their worldly neighbours and it diluted their commitment to Jesus and distorted their faith through their actions.

And Jesus is not impressed. He takes this very seriously.

But here's the crazy thing. The people were out partying hard were not the only ones compromising their faith. Did you notice that in verse 14? "I have *a few things* against you." The immorality and idolatry piece is one thing; what else is going on?

Well, it's subtle, but it's there. The fact is that there were faithful people in Pergamum who were tolerating the compromising ones. Antipas's wife is there on Sunday morning and this other believer comes in reeking of cheap wine and she says 'well, that's ok; we're saved by grace through faith after all.'

Jesus says 'no, that's not ok. By tolerating this kind of worldly behaviour in the church, you're compromising your faith too.' And frankly, He says 'I laid down My life to redeem you from sin

and make you pure and holy; I don't want you bringing that old way of life into My holy Church!

And so Jesus, as the Judge says, verse 16:

16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

He says to the partying believers – 'Stop compromising your faith and put faith in action!' And He says to the faithful believers who are nonetheless watering down their faith by putting up with the partyers – 'Stop tolerating the ones who are compromising!'

Jesus shows us here what a serious problem compromise is! And it's a scary thought to see Jesus, as the Judge, sword in hand.

But listen 'you're gonna get it' is not the way that Jesus operates. Not now anyways. He's already died so that we don't 'get it.' His heart is for us. His desire is that none would be lost and so He warns the church in Pergamum compassionately and holds out rewards to motivate us.

Just listen to the change in tone here – verse 17 -

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.

Yes, Jesus is the Judge but He is also the gracious gift giver. He says 'If you let go of the ways of the world – engaging in sin, tolerating sin – and hold fast to Me in faith and practice, then I will give you hidden manna, a white stone and new name.'

Let me unpack those. First: 'I will give you hidden manna.' What's manna? It's food from Heaven. It's what God freely gave to His people after He delivered them from slavery.^v But it's also the antithesis of the pagan food that some in Pergamum were eating at the idol feasts. In essence, Jesus is saying – 'you keep eating that food at the idol banquets, you're eating food that leads to death; hold fast to Me and I will give you manna from Heaven, the bread that leads to life!' Jesus is offering them life.

And not only that, He's offering them a new identity and identification with Jesus Himself – 'the white stone with a new name on it that only you know.' There are about a dozen different possibilities what the white stone stands for^{vi} but I suspect that's it's not the stone that's important but the name that's written on it. The 'white stone' just means you can write on it and see what's written on it; what's really important here is the new name that's written on it.

And come with me on a journey for a minute because I think this all ties together. Turn to the back of Revelation, Revelation 19:11.

11 I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war.

12 His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself.

15 Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations.

This is Jesus. This is the same Jesus who is talking to the church at Pergamum. He's got the same sword for judgment; He's God's agent for justice and He has a name that only He knows.

He says 'Instead of holding fast to the world, you hold fast to Me and I will put the name that only I know on your stone. I will let you in on My secret, on my glory.' This is a promise of identification with Jesus, of becoming one with Him, of being adopted into His family and receiving a new and superior name to the one that we have now.

Jesus says 'Hold fast to my name and I will share my name with you.' Those are the promises that Jesus holds out to us when we as a church remain true to Him.

So that's the letter to Pergamum. Hold fast to my Name. Don't compromise with the world. Let's change gears here and talk about what this means for us. What does it mean for us as believers and what does it mean for us as a church?

First, I think that this is a call for us all to hold fast to Jesus' name. We don't face the same kind of life-threatening persecution that the Christians in Pergamum faced, but we need to hold fast to Jesus all the same. In fact, in this kind of 'unthreatening' atmosphere, it's all the more important to not become complacent, to guard against other things coming in and taking first place in our hearts. We don't have to cling to Jesus for dear life the way some believers do in the world today; we need to be careful not to grab onto something else at the same time.

A lot of companies these days seem to want to put 'plus' on everything – Disney+, Paramount+, Google+ - don't put a 'plus' on Jesus and make Him 'Jesus+'. Hold fast to Him and let Him have the throne of your heart.

So first – hold fast to Jesus' name. Second – don't compromise with the world.

I recognize that we don't have the same kind of outward expressions of immorality and idolatry as the Pergamum church had – I sincerely doubt that any of you were at an idol feast with after-supper orgy last night – I hope! – but these things have parallels in our culture too.

Adultery and pornography and our culture's 'anything goes' attitude towards sex is the 'immorality' of our day. Abusing alcohol and other substances is just as much an issue today as it was in Pergamum. Materialism and money and worry and work and secularism and

nationalism are the idols of our day because our culture looks to them for the security and value and strength and meaning that only God can give. These other things are just cheap knock-offs and yet so many people hold to them.

We need to resist the temptation to allow these attitudes into our hearts and minds so that we don't compromise with the world and dilute our faith. Satan is just as active today as he was in Pergamum and he's still running the same play – if I can't overcome them spiritually, I'll undermine them materially. Hold fast to Jesus and don't let the ways of the world into your heart.

So hold fast to Jesus and don't compromise; that holds for us as believers but it also holds for us as a church too.

One of the things that really struck me about this letter was its corporate nature. Yes, it's a call for each of us to hold fast to Jesus in faith and in practice, but it's also a call for each of us to help each other to do that.

It does no good for one of us or a few of us in the church to compromise on some detail and the rest of us to tolerate it; we need to help each other to love God with all our heart and mind and strength.^{vii}

I know that there are churches that will tolerate sin just to keep the peace, they'll put up with an adulterous relationship or abuse in their ranks; they'll tolerate new and innovative ideas about Jesus that are way off the mark theologically; they'll let wealth or privilege or favoritism run the church.

We can't be that church. We need to help one another to hold fast to Jesus in faith and in practice. We need to be open to hearing from another 'I think you need to let go of this thing so that you can hold on with both hands.' You guys often make it hard for me as a preacher because I think you've got this. But then again, I only see you on Sunday; I don't know what you're doing and thinking on Monday.

So let's spend some time here as we close opening our hearts up to the Holy Spirit. Let's spend some time in pray asking God to reveal what's going on in our hearts as we prepare to respond.

PRAYER –

Are there areas where I am compromising? Where the ways of the world have seeped into my faith?

The promise of heavenly food, identity with Jesus.

ⁱ Most commentaries present this information. See for example Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT), 138.

ⁱⁱ See for example Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (NCBC), 102.

ⁱⁱⁱ Witherington, 102.

^{iv} Douglas Connelly, *The Book of Revelation for Blockheads*, 40.

^v Colin Hemer refers to a Jewish legend of manna from the Ark of the Covenant being hidden beneath Mt. Sinai and revealed at the coming of the Messiah. Colin Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 94.

^{vi} Hemer, 99-100.

^{vii} Darrell Johnson, a professor out in B.C., says something very profound when he writes:

“We learn from this [letter]... that tolerance is not a biblical virtue. Patience is. Understanding is. Civility is. Graciousness is. Mercy is. Humility is. But not tolerance... The church of Jesus Christ is to be an ‘inclusive’ community in the sense that all are welcome: Jew and Gentile, free and slave, male and female—all are welcome! But the church is not to be inclusive of all ideas, of all presuppositions, of all social and spiritual persuasions. All of us are welcome, but all of us are then called by the Head of the church to repent, to change our minds, to submit our thinking to the think of Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans: ‘Do not be conformed to this age but by transformed by the renewal of your mind.’ Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, 78.