

Revelation week 7 (June 17, 2015)

Pergamum: The Worldly church 2:12-17

I. Introduction

- a. For many people in today's church, the term *worldliness* has a quaint, old-fashioned ring to it. They associate it with prohibitions against things like dancing, going to the movies, or playing cards.
- b. Today's user-friendly, seeker-oriented, market-driven church doesn't preach much against worldliness.
- c. But unlike much of the contemporary church, the Bible does not hesitate to condemn worldliness for the serious sin that it is.
- d. What is Worldliness
 - i. It is any preoccupation with or interest in the temporal system of life that places anything perishable before that which is eternal.
 - ii. Since believers are not part of the world system (John 15:19), they must not act as though they were. "Do not be conformed to this world," wrote the apostle Paul, "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2). Because they have been redeemed by God's grace, believers are called to "deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12).
 - iii. "Pure and undefiled religion," notes James, consists in keeping "oneself unstained by the

world” (James 1:27), because “friendship with the world is hostility toward God[.]

- iv. So whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).
- e. First John 2:15–17 makes the believer’s duty to avoid worldliness unmistakably clear:
 - i. Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.
- f. The church at Pergamum, like much of today’s church, had failed to heed the biblical warnings against worldliness.
- g. Consequently, it had drifted into compromise and was in danger of becoming intertwined with the world.
 - i. That would be the next step in the downward spiral from the Ephesian church’s loss of its first love for Jesus Christ.
- h. Conforming to the general pattern of the seven letters, the letter to Pergamum unfolds in seven stages: the correspondent, the church, the city, the commendation, the concern, the command, and the counsel.

II. **The correspondent.**

- a. The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. (2:12c)

- b. The holder of **the sharp two-edged sword** is the risen, glorified Lord Jesus Christ, as indicated in 1:16. He, through the inspired apostle John, is the author of this letter.
- c. In this letter, like those to Ephesus and Smyrna, Christ identifies Himself using one of the descriptive phrases from John's vision in 1:12–17.
- d. The **sharp two-edged sword** refers to the Word of God.
 - i. Hebrews 4:12 notes that “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.”
 - ii. The apostle Paul also uses the metaphor of a sword to describe the Word (Eph. 6:17).
 - iii. That the sword is **two-edged** depicts the Word's potency and power in exposing and judging the innermost thoughts of the human heart.
 - iv. The Word never wields a dull edge.
- e. This description of the Lord Jesus Christ pictures Him as judge and executioner.
- f. Describing His appearance at the Second Coming, John writes that “from His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty” (19:15).
- g. This is not a positive, promising introduction; it is a threatening one.

- i. It is the first negative introduction of Christ because the Pergamum church faced imminent judgment.
 - ii. Disaster loomed on the horizon for this worldly church; it was and is but a short step from compromising with the world to forsaking God altogether and facing His wrath.
- h. The church at Pergamum is symbolic of the many churches throughout history that have compromised with the world.
 - i. That spirit of compromise was especially evident during the period from the fourth to the seventh centuries.
 - ii. In 313 A.D., the emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, granting religious freedom to the Christians and ending two and a half centuries of savage persecution.
 - iii. He adopted Christianity and made it the favored religion of the empire. That began the process by which Christianity merged with the Roman state.
 - iv. Heathen priests became Christian priests; heathen temples became Christian churches; heathen feasts became Christian festivals.
 - v. Christianity was no longer a personal matter, but a national identity. The church married the political system, so that worldliness was synonymous with the church.
- i. Today, in some ways, worldliness is still rampant in the church.

- i. Churches, even entire denominations, have departed from the true faith and embraced the world philosophically and morally.
- j. Like the church at Pergamum, they fall under judgment by the Lord of the true church.

III. **The Church.**

- a. **the church in Pergamum (2:12a)**
- b. The book of Acts does not record the founding of the church at Pergamum.
- c. According to Acts 16:7–8, Paul passed through miss-e sha (Mysia) (the region in which Pergamum was located) on his second missionary journey, but there is no record that the apostle either preached the gospel or founded a church there at that time.
- d. Most likely, the church at Pergamum was founded during Paul's ministry in Ephesus, when the gospel went out from there to be preached throughout the province of Asia (Acts 19:10).
- e. Because the church was surrounded by the pagan culture, it was exposed continually to its allurements, strengthened by familiar sins.
- f. It also faced severe animosity from the persecuting emperor worshipers.

IV. **The City.**

- a. **Pergamum (2:12b)**
- b. Pergamum was about one hundred miles north of Ephesus, with Smyrna located about halfway in between.
- c. Unlike Ephesus and Smyrna, Pergamum was not a port city but was located about fifteen miles inland from the Aegean Sea.

- i. Nor was it on any of the major trade routes.
 - ii. Yet, as its ancient capital, Pergamum was considered Asia's greatest city.
 - iii. The Roman writer Pliny called it "by far the most distinguished city in Asia" (cited in Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 95).
 - iv. By the time John penned Revelation, Pergamum had been Asia's capital for almost 250 years (since 133 B.C., when its last king bequeathed his kingdom to Rome).
 - v. Pergamum survives today as the Turkish city of (Ber-ga-ma) Bergama.
- d. Much of Pergamum was built on a large hill towering some one thousand feet above the plain.
 - i. So impressive is the site even in modern times that the famed nineteenth-century archaeologist Sir William Ramsay commented, "Beyond all other sites in Asia Minor it gives the traveler the impression of a royal city, the home of authority: the rocky hill on which it stands is so huge, and dominates the broad plain of the Caicus [River valley] so proudly and boldly" (*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Albany, Oreg.: AGES Software; reprint of the 1904 edition), 226).
- e. Pergamum's huge library (200,000 handwritten volumes) was second only to that of Alexandria.
- f. Because of its library, Pergamum was an important center of culture and learning.

- i. The city saw itself as the defender of Greek culture in Asia Minor.
- g. Pergamum was an important center of worship for four of the main deities of the Greco-Roman world, and temples dedicated to Athena, (uh-sklee-pee-us) Asclepius, Dionysos, and Zeus were located there.
- h. But overshadowing the worship of all those deities was Pergamum's devotion to the cult of emperor worship.
 - i. Pergamum built the first temple devoted to emperor worship in Asia (29 B.C.), in honor of Emperor Augustus.
 - ii. Later, the city would build two more such temples, honoring two other emperors.
 - iii. The city thus became the center of emperor worship in the province, and there, more than in any other city in Asia, Christians were in danger of harm from the emperor worship cult.
- i. Elsewhere, Christians were primarily in danger on the one day per year they were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor; in Pergamum they were in danger every day.

V. **The Commendation.**

- a. "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. **(2:13)**
- b. Despite the difficult circumstances in which they found themselves, the believers at Pergamum courageously maintained their faith in Jesus Christ.

- c. He commended them for continuing to **hold fast His name**—even though they lived **where Satan’s throne is, where Satan dwells**.
- d. Many suggestions have been offered as to the identification of **Satan’s throne**.
 - i. Some identify it with the magnificent altar of Zeus that dominated Pergamum’s acropolis.
 - ii. This was not simply an altar, as Edwin Yamauchi notes: The word *altar* is somewhat misleading. The structure is a monumental colonnaded court in the form of a horseshoe, 120 by 112 feet. The podium of the altar was nearly 18 feet high. The great frieze, which ran at the base of the structure for 446 feet, depicted a gigantomachy, that is, a battle of the gods and the giants. It was one of the greatest works of Hellenistic art. (*New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 35–36)
- e. Such an impressive structure could easily merit the designation **Satan’s throne**.
- f. Others connect **Satan’s throne** with the worship of the god (uh-sklee-pee-us) Asklepios that was prevalent in Pergamum.
 - i. Asklepios was the god of healing, and people came from all over the ancient world to Pergamum, seeking to be healed at his shrine.
 - ii. Asklepios was depicted as a snake, and nonpoisonous snakes roamed freely in his temple.
 - iii. People seeking healing either slept or lay down on the temple’s floor, hoping to be touched by

one of the snakes (symbolically representing the god himself) and thereby be healed.

- iv. Such symbolism would undoubtedly remind Christians of Satan (cf. Rev. 12:9, 14, 15; 20:2).
- g. Others point out that Pergamum was the leading center of emperor worship in the province of Asia.
 - i. And the cult of emperor worship certainly posed the gravest threat to the Christians in Pergamum.
 - ii. It was for their refusal to worship the emperor, not the pagan gods, that Christians faced execution.
 - iii. **Satan's throne** could easily be understood as a reference to the might of Rome under the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4), blaspheming the true God by the emperor worship cult.
- h. For any or all of those reasons, Pergamum could justifiably be called the city **where Satan's throne is**.
- i. In the midst of those difficult and trying circumstances, the believers continued to **dwell**—a word that speaks of permanent residence as opposed to merely passing through—in Pergamum.
 - i. In modern terms, they "hung in there."
 - ii. Despite the persecution and suffering they endured, the believers at Pergamum continued to **hold fast** the **name** of Christ, **and did not deny** the **faith**.
 - iii. They did not deviate from fidelity to Christ or to the central truths of the Christian faith.
 - iv. The faithful believers at Pergamum exemplified the truth of Christ's words in Matthew 16:18: "I

will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

- j. No amount of satanic opposition can destroy genuine saving faith such as those believers possessed.
- k. The church at Pergamum maintained its faithfulness **even in the days of Antipas**, whom Christ described as **My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you**.
 - i. Nothing certain is known about Antipas apart from this text.
 - ii. He was probably one of the leaders of the Pergamum church.
 - iii. According to tradition, he was roasted to death inside a brass bull during the persecution instigated by Emperor Domitian.
- l. **Witness** translates *martus*, a word that eventually became transliterated into English as the word *martyr*, because so many witnesses for Christ paid with their lives.
 - i. Here was a man who paid the ultimate price for his refusal to compromise.
 - ii. Because of his faithfulness, the risen Lord commended Antipas with a title used elsewhere to refer to Himself (Rev. 1:5; 3:14).
 - iii. Antipas’s faithfulness and courage were a rebuke to those at Pergamum who were tempted to compromise with the world.

VI. **The Concern.**

- a. 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. (2:14–15)

- b. The church at Pergamum remained loyal to Christ and Christian truth.
- c. It faithfully persevered at the very headquarters, as it were, of satanic opposition—even in the face of martyrdom.
- d. Yet all was not well at Pergamum. After commending the believers there, Christ informed them, **I have a few things against you.**
- e. His concern was that they had **there some who hold to false teaching.**
- f. While the majority of the believers at Pergamum were faithful and loyal to the truth, there were some associated with the church who came to believe false doctrine.
- g. While many in the Christian realm today make light of doctrine, and biblical and theological error are viewed as unimportant, that is not the perspective of the Lord of the church.
- h. Our Lord holds it against any in His church who hold to error.
 - i. Tragically, the rest were tolerating those who were holding on to these false teachings, instead of confronting them and, if they refused to repent, putting them out of the church (cf. Titus 3:10–11).

- ii. Like many churches today, the church at Pergamum failed to obey the biblical mandate to practice church discipline (cf. Matt. 18:15–18).
- i. Specifically, Christ was concerned with two heresies being tolerated at Pergamum, one associated with an Old Testament character, the other with a New Testament person.
- j. First, some were following the **teaching of Balaam**.
 - i. The story of Balaam, a notorious Old Testament prophet for hire, is found in Numbers 22–25. Fearful of the Israelites because of what they had done to the Amorites, Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse them.
 - ii. After trying unsuccessfully three times to curse Israel, Balaam came up with another plan. Since he was unable to curse the Israelites, he decided to corrupt them by **teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality**.
 - iii. He plotted to use Moabite women to lure the Israelites into the behavior of the godless world around them—sexual immorality and idolatry (Num. 25; 31:16).
 - iv. That blasphemous union with Satan and false gods would debase the Israelites and destroy their spiritual power. Balaam’s plan succeeded, though not to the extent that he had hoped.
 - v. God intervened and severely chastened Israel, executing twenty-four thousand (Num. 25:9), including many of the leaders (Num. 25:4–5).

- vi. That drastic action halted the Israelites' slide into immorality and idolatry.
- k. Like the Israelites who were seduced by Balaam's false teaching, some in the church at Pergamum were lured to mix with the pagan system (cf. Jude 10–11).
 - i. But as God severely chastened Israel for such a union, so the Lord Jesus Christ threatens to do the same in this passage.
 - ii. In 2 Corinthians 6:14–17, the apostle Paul points out the sinful absurdity of believers' seeking to unite with the world: Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean; and I will welcome you."
- l. Despite the graphic example of Israel and the clear teaching of the apostle Paul, with which they were likely familiar, some in Pergamum persisted in following Balaam's teaching.
- m. They believed one could attend pagan feasts, with all their debauchery and sexual immorality, and still join the church to worship Jesus Christ.

- n. But that is impossible, since “friendship with the world is hostility toward God. Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).
- o. “I urge you as aliens and strangers,” wrote Peter, “to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11).
- p. The issue of whether Christians could participate in idolatrous feasts had been settled decades earlier at the Jerusalem Council, which issued a mandate for believers to “abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication” (Acts 15:29).
- q. Such compromise still goes on today, as people like Balaam appear to speak for God, but motivated by greed and self-importance they lead the church into sin.
- r. A second heresy tolerated at Pergamum involved a New Testament figure.
- s. There were **some** there **who in the same way** held **the teaching of the Nicolaitans**.
- t. The phrase **in the same way** indicates that the teaching of the **Nicolaitans** led to the same wicked behavior as that of the followers of Balaam.
- u. **Nicolaitans** derived their name from Nicholas, one of the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food in Acts 6.
 - i. Whether he became an apostate (as some of the early church fathers believed) or the **Nicolaitans**, his followers, perverted his teachings is not known.

- ii. Abusing the biblical teaching on Christian liberty, the **Nicolaitans** also taught that Christians could participate in pagan orgies.
 - iii. They seduced the church with immorality and idolatry.
 - v. The majority of the believers at Pergamum did not participate in the errors of either heretical group.
 - w. They remained steadfastly loyal to Christ and the Christian faith.
 - x. But by tolerating the groups and refusing to exercise church discipline, they shared in their guilt, which brought the Lord's judgment.
- VII. **The command.**
- a. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. **(2:16)**
 - b. The only remedy for any sinful behavior is to **repent**. **Repent** is from *metanoēō*, a word used in Scripture to describe a change of mind that results in a change of behavior.
 - c. While tolerance is praised in our modern culture, tolerating heretical teaching or sinful behavior in the church is not a virtue but a sin.
 - d. So serious a matter is it that, should they fail to repent of failure to discipline, Christ warns them **I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth** (cf. Num. 22:23).
 - e. The entire church faced the battle sword of Christ's judgment, the heretics for practicing their heresy and iniquity, and the rest of the church for tolerating it.

- i. The change in pronouns from **you** to **them** reflects an underlying Hebrew idiom commonly found in the Septuagint; both pronouns refer to the entire church.
- f. The church cannot tolerate evil in any form.
 - i. To the boastful Corinthians, proudly tolerating a man guilty of incest, Paul wrote, “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened” (1 Cor. 5:6–7).
 - ii. Sinning believers should be made to feel miserable in the fellowship and worship of the church by being confronted powerfully with the Word of God.
 - iii. Neither is the goal of the church to provide an environment where unbelievers feel comfortable; it is to be a place where they can hear the truth and be convicted of their sins so as to be saved (Rom. 10:13–17).
 - iv. Gently (cf. 2 Tim. 2:24–26), lovingly, graciously, yet firmly, unbelievers need to be confronted with the reality of their sin and God’s gracious provision through the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- g. Error will never be suppressed by compromising with it.
- h. Today’s nonconfrontive church is largely repeating the error of the Pergamum church on a grand scale, and faces the judgment of the Lord of the church.

VIII. **The Counsel.**

- a. 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. **(2:17)**
- b. Christ concludes His letter with words of counsel and encouragement.
- c. The phrase **he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches** stresses the vital importance of Christ's words and believers' responsibility to hear and heed them.
- d. As is the case with the other six letters, the promises are addressed to **him who overcomes**—a phrase encompassing all believers (1 John 5:4–5).
- e. Christ promises three things to the faithful members of the church at Pergamum.
- f. First, He promises to **give them some of the hidden manna**.
 - i. **Manna** was a honey-flavored bread with which God fed the Israelites during their years of wandering in the wilderness (Ex. 16:14ff.).
 - ii. According to Exodus 16:33, the Israelites were to memorialize that divine provision by keeping a jar of manna inside the Ark of the Covenant during their travels.
 - iii. The **hidden manna** represents Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life who came down from heaven (John 6:48–51).
 - iv. He provides spiritual sustenance for those who put their faith in Him. The **hidden manna**

symbolizes all the blessings and benefits of knowing Christ (Eph. 1:3).

- g. Second, white stone. There has been much speculation about what the **white stone** symbolizes.
 - i. Some link it with the Urim and Thummim on the breastplate of the high priest (Ex. 28:15, 30; Lev. 8:8; Num. 27:21; Deut. 33:8).
 - ii. Those stones were used to determine God's will and represented the right of the high priest to request guidance from God for the leader who could not approach God directly, but had to come through the priestly structure.
 - iii. Somehow, God caused those stones to disclose His will in a form beyond just the simple yes and no of casting lots.
 - iv. According to this view, by this **white stone** God promises the overcomers knowledge of His will.
 - v. Others identify the **white stone** as a diamond, the most precious of stones, symbolizing God's precious gift of eternal life to believers.
 - vi. It seems best, however, to understand the **white stone** in light of the Roman custom of awarding white stones to the victors in athletic contests.
 - vii. A white stone, inscribed with the athlete's name, served as his ticket to a special awards banquet. In this view, Christ promises the overcomers entrance to the eternal victory celebration in heaven.
- h. Third promise, There will be **a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.**

- i. As is self-evident from that phrase, we cannot know what that **new name** is until we receive it (cf. Deut. 29:29).
- ii. *Kainos* (**new**) does not mean new in contrast to old in time, but new in the sense of qualitatively different.
- iii. The **new name** will serve as each believer's admission pass into eternal glory.
- iv. It will uniquely reflect God's special love for and adoption of every true child of His.
- i. The Pergamum church faced the same choice that every similar church faces.
 - i. It could repent and receive all the blessedness of eternal life in the glory of heaven.
 - ii. Or it could refuse to repent and face the terrifying reality of having the Lord Jesus Christ declare war on it. Maintaining the path of compromise ultimately leads to judgment.

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¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 81–93.