

Conquer or be conquered

Revelation 2:12-17

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I recently read about Mischief Night. Do you know what Mischief Night is? Mischief Night is on October 30. It is the night before Halloween. Mischief Night is a night in which people do practical jokes to each other. In the 1970s, one pastor tells of a particular mischief night he will never forget. A group of neighborhood boys broke into a local store. They did not want to steal anything. They wanted to do a practical joke. They began to take the price tags stickers of the more expensive items and put them on the cheaper items. And vice versa. This was in a day and a time where there were no computers to scan anything. Only stickers or tags that were placed on every item. When the boys had finished, you could buy a brand-new toaster for \$.25 and a stick of gum for \$30. They say that in that particular area of Philadelphia, the story is famous even until today.

Do you know I believe that the enemy of our souls is also trying to break into our church? He knows that he cannot win against us from the outside. So, he plans to take us from the inside. He really wants that we would make the things that are small and unimportant the main things, much like those boys swapped the price tags stickers in that store. The devil wants us to take important things like the gospel and Christian morality and push those aside. He wants us to value what the world values. This is exactly what was happening to the church in Pergamum. Though they resisted physical violence from the outside, they were being tempted to violate their principles and values from the inside. Let us take a look at the letter of Jesus to this church and see what we can learn for our lives today. Here are the three main ideas from the text today:

1. Jesus knows the place we live in. (V. 12-13a)
2. Jesus commands us to hold fast to his name and to reject the behaviors and values of the world that displease God. (V. 13b-15)
3. Jesus promises blessings or discipline to the person who does not listen to his word. (V. 16-17)

1. Jesus knows the place we live in

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."

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:" Let's just begin there. What can we learn about the city of Pergamum? Pergamum was the capital of its own kingdom before the Romans took over the area around 134 or 133 BC. The Romans moved the capital of Asia Minor to Ephesus. But it still carried a reputation of importance and of political power throughout Asia Minor. At one time, it boasted of having a library with 200,000 volumes. It had a large medical college, along with several large temples. It was a religious, philosophical, political, and scientific center.

Jesus writes to the church in Pergamum, reminding them that his words are *"the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword"*. In the vision of Revelation 1, the sword is not in the hand of Christ but coming out of his mouth. Here we understand that the very words of Christ are compared to the power of a double edge sword. In the Old Testament, God spoke the world into existence. This same God enabled the prophets to speak words that bring judgment or blessing. Christ's words have the potential to bring discipline or blessing to the church in Pergamum. We shall see shortly what the discipline or blessing may be.

Jesus tells them that he knows where they *dwell, "where Satan's throne is"*. It is difficult to say exactly which aspect of the city Christ is calling Satan's throne. He might be referring to the very large altar made for the god Zeus. It is common to describe gods as living in the altar or above the altar as if it were their throne. Since this Greek god was the greatest of their gods, it is possible that he's referring to this altar as the throne of Satan. Another possible meaning for Satan's throne is that the city held the largest medical complex and a temple dedicated to the god Asclepius. Asclepius symbol of a rod with snakes wrapped around it is the symbol for medical care in different places around the world. There's no doubt that the early Christians would have seen Asclepius as a false god as even more so with the snake as his symbol. One of the creepiest rituals that took place in the temple of Asclepius was when a person would go spend the night in a room filled with non-poisonous snakes. The snakes might crawl over them or touch them throughout the night as a symbol of possible blessing from the god Asclepius. The last possible meaning for Satan's throne is that the people of Pergamum were very loyal to the Roman empire. In A.D. 29, they built a temple to Augustus Caesar that was used to worship Roman Emperors. So, which one was it that was the throne of Satan? I believe, most likely, Jesus is referencing how all three temples mean that there is a huge demonic presence that is a danger and possibly a temptation for the Christians there. Do you know that Jesus understands the benefits and the difficulties of living in Madrid, Spain, in the year 2020? He knows how hard it is for us in a world that mocks him. But that does not excuse us from being faithful. These Christians were in a much more difficult situation, and many of them were faithful.

2. Jesus commands us to hold fast to his name and to reject the behaviors and values of the world that displease God

"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."

Jesus congratulates them, saying: *"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."* So, we learn that the church at Pergamum had experienced persecution to the point of having one of its members being killed. Jesus describes Antipas as "my faithful witness"; this is the very title Jesus will go by later in Revelation 3:14. The people of Pergamum are described as holding fast to Jesus' name. In English, to hold fast to something means to grip it tightly so that someone cannot take it out of your hands by force. It was a tug-of-war. Antipas and the church members of Pergamum had refused to deny Jesus, and it cost Antipas his very life. What is important to remember is that you only have two hands. What happens if you have one on one rope and the other hand on another rope? It becomes very difficult to hold either rope. In a sense, you cannot hold on to Jesus and sin at the same time. This is why the Bible makes very black-and-white statements about love, service, and faithfulness to God. Let's read a few of them:

- 1 John 2:15 – *"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him."*
- Matthew 6:24 – *"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."*
- James 4:4 – *"You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."*

To be able to hold fast to Jesus, you need to be able to let go of all the other ropes that are pulling at your heart. May the glorious Spirit of God show you what they are. Sometimes they are hidden, and it takes reflection and prayer to see them. For others it takes the fire of trials to bring the impurities to the top. Many of you are seeking peace, but you will not have peace until you let go of the rope you are holding on to. What stirs your emotions? What leads you to anger, jealousy, hatred, bitterness? What gives you peace or happiness? What do you think about constantly? A job? Food? Sex? Clothes? Someone's opinion? Your health? Your status? Some of us need to get these things fixed with God. It is very important that you let go of the world, but it is more important that you hold fast to Jesus. He is worth it. He is worth dying for. May we have the heart of Antipas, the heart to hold on to Jesus until our last breath.

It would be great if the letter ended on such a positive note, but as we will see, Satan could not conquer them from the outside, so he was trying to conquer them from the inside. There is a repeated pattern throughout the Bible and church history. First, Christians are able to live in peace even though they do not agree with everything in the culture around them. Then they are persecuted, ridiculed, and even killed for their beliefs. Usually, there is a group of unfaithful Christians who try to change, adapt, or even deny whatever belief caused the persecution. This leads to a kind of syncretism, a mix of beliefs that displeases God and will also destroy the faith. That is what was happening to the church in Pergamum. They were standing strong against the attacks coming from the outside of the church, but some were beginning to weaken on their convictions. That is why Jesus says: 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."

So, what exactly was happening in the church at Pergamum? Jesus says that some of them hold to the teaching of Balaam, and he compares this teaching to that of the Nicolaitans. "Balaam" in Hebrew and "Nicolaitan" in Greek, both have the root meaning of "conquer the people". There is no doubt that this is a play on words. The Nicolaitans are trying to conquer the church like Balaam tried to conquer the Israelites. Let me refresh your memory about Balaam. Balaam was famous for trying to curse the Israelites, but he failed. Every time he would try to speak a curse, a blessing would come out. Though he failed to curse the Israelites, he had a second plan. After all, the King of Moab, Balak, paid well. Balaam instructed Balak to seduce the people of God into sexual immorality and idolatry. The story of Israel's sexual immorality and idolatry at Baal Peor is recorded in Numbers 25, but it is not until you get to Numbers 31:16 that we learn this: *"¹⁶ Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord."*

But how can we know who are the false prophets? Old Testaments Prophets warned God's people about this. Jesus, Paul, and Peter warned the church about this. From their writing there is a wealth of information. Let me give you're a short list of some of the descriptions of a false prophet, teacher, pastor, Apostle, or leader that appear in the Bible. Not everyone will apply to every false leader, but these are characteristics:

1. They will not necessarily look or act like bad people. (Matthew 7:15)
2. They will lead people away from trusting God's word and into seeking experiences. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5, Galatians 1:8-9)
3. They will deny the faith handed down from Jesus and the Apostles. (Jude 1:3)
4. They will approve of sinful lifestyles and behaviors. (Jude 1:4)
5. They will be people-pleasers who preach what people want to hear instead of God's word. (Luke 6:26, 2 Timothy 4:3)
6. They will speak to demons as if they had the power and authority in themselves. (Jude 8-10)
7. They will be greedy. (Jude 11, 2 Peter 2:15)

In Jude 11, it says that the false teachers have abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error. In 2 Peter 2:15, Peter says, *"¹⁵ Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing."* There is no doubt the motivation for Balaam's evil was gain. Jesus is comparing the Nicolaitan teachers to what Balaam did. It is difficult to know the exact nature of the sin that was occurring, but here's my best guess. I believe that the devil could not conquer the church from the outside, so he wanted to twist them from the inside. In the case of the Israelites, they were tempted to sexual immorality and idolatry. That could be what the church here is literally facing, or it could be something like that. The Christians were probably tired of being persecuted. It was probably hard to do their professions if they refuse to sacrifice to the gods or the Roman empire. It was difficult to live in a place that hated them for their beliefs. So, some of the Christians had begun to listen to the Nicolaitans beliefs. They began to say, "This belief (or sinful lifestyle, or values system) is really not that bad." Maybe they begin, "It's OK if we go to the feasts in honor of the false gods; after all, they are only statues." "It's

OK if we indulge in sexual morality, because God created the body for sex. Surely God would not give us an appetite and leave us starving?" With these kinds of convincing arguments, they probably began to bring the world into the church.

In our day, I see many of our young people and even our adults who are quick to deny the basic truths of Christianity. They are ashamed to say that Jesus is the only way to God. The world says all good people go to heaven, and I believe that is probably a more common belief amongst young Christian people. The world says that if there is a God, he will surely not send anyone to hell. So many Christians do not even speak of these things. What about modern-day sexuality? The world says any form of sex is worthy of being celebrated. God clearly condemns many forms of sexuality and any sex outside of marriage. What is happening is many people, like the Nicolaitans, are re-interpreting the message of Christ because they feel the pressure from the modern-day culture. I understand why Christian people are scared to speak of the subjects, as these are very difficult topics. But surely, we must believe the word of God whether we understand it or not. Just watch the way Ravi Zacharias answers these kinds of questions. He is brilliant, funny and convincing, God rest his soul. You do not have to understand something perfectly to believe it. How many of you can explain how television works? Can you explain how your cell phone has a signal with your voice on it? I do not need to understand how the medicine works to believe the Doctor is helping me. In the same way, hold onto the faith of the Apostles and the words of Jesus. Our loving God, just like a loving doctor, has prescribed the right way to live and the right way to think. May he give us the grace to believe him, even when the world around us or the church around us disagrees. What happens if we do not listen to the words of Jesus?

3. Jesus promises blessings or discipline to the person who does not listen to his word.

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."

It is important to notice that Jesus says that it is only some of the church that is beginning to fall away. Because some are falling away, he calls the attention of them all. There is a lesson to be learned here. Your problems are other people's problems. Your burdens are other people's burdens. Your sin affects other people. I was recently impressed by a counselor who wrote about the effects of sin. He says that we can think that our sins are like rocks. If we just bury them out of sight, they will go away. He says that sin is like a seed, not a rock. Bury it, and in time it will sprout into something else. That made a lot of sense to me. That is why Christ, in all his love, tells the church that some are going astray. He wants them to know that it is the job of both those who are going astray and those who are not to do what is right. They are all responsible. Jesus calls the entire church to repent. He gives them a choice. They can choose a blessing or a curse. If they do not repent and remove the sin and the worldliness from their own lives and their own church, he himself will come and remove it with the sword of his mouth.

But they may choose the blessing instead. He promises three rewards for those who conquer the temptation. First, he will give us **hidden manna**. When the Israelites were traveling through the

desert, bread came down from heaven. It was as if God was providing for them when no one else would. What Jesus is telling his church is that no matter what the world threatens us with, starvation or loss of jobs or punishment for following him, he can provide even in the middle of the trials, like giving bread from heaven. Conquer and the hidden manna will be ours.

Second, he promises to give them a **white stone**. When Jewish courts were trying a case as a group of judges, the Elders would cast their votes with a white or a black stone. If the Jewish Elder gave a white stone, that meant he was declaring his belief that the person was innocent. Jesus is telling the church that even if the world accuses them of being bad people because they refuse to go along with their version of morality, he will defend them on the day they stand before God. They will be declared innocent, as Jesus is the only one who votes.

Lastly, he promises them a **new name**. Many times in the Bible, God changes the individual names of his people (Abram to Abraham, Sarai, to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, Simon to Peter, and so on). This means that God himself is giving them a new identity. Christians were hated for their beliefs and practices. To be a Christian was to choose to be rejected. But Christ promises them that he will one day wipe all of their shame away and give them a new identity. He will honor them for their sacrifices and their faithfulness.

You see, Christ is looking at his people and he's calling to them. He is saying conquer the sin in your life and in your church, or be conquered by the devil. There is no other option. There is no middle ground. No man can serve two masters. Some of you today are not happy. You cannot find peace in the world, and you cannot find peace with God. The Bible says there's a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads to death. Many of you are on the path to death. God loves you. He is calling to you. God sent his son that any person who believes in Jesus could be saved and have eternal life. Through a relationship with God, you can find peace and joy. But you cannot have the faith that mixes the world and the church. If you mix these two, you'll never be happy in either. So I challenge you today, would you let go of your sins and come to Jesus? You will never regret it.

Questions for reflection

1. How would you describe the country and city that you live in? What are the good and bad things about it? In what ways do Spain and Madrid honor God, and in what ways does it dishonor him?
2. Do you believe that behind all of the false religions is the work of Satan?
3. Would you say that Christian persecution is getting better or worse in our times?
4. What do you like about the way Jesus speaks to the church at Pergamum?
5. What sins can people hold onto tighter than they hold on to Jesus? If you feel comfortable, share your own struggles.
6. In what ways do you think the church can mix with the faith of the world? In what ways do we adapt their morals and values that are different from God's?
7. What do you think you should do after reading and listening to the sermon? Do you believe God might be asking you to do something?