

## Pergamum: The Compromising Church

LL&L

Revelation 2:12-17

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### Recap of Series

Tim. Pastor. **Revelation 2:12-17**. Pray.

We are continuing on in our series this morning through the first few chapters of Revelation. The apostle John, he's the last living disciple of Jesus, is in exile on the island of Patmos and he has a vision, where Jesus tells Him to send **7 letters to 7 churches in 7 ancient cities** in what is now modern day Turkey.



And we've been exploring what the letters from Jesus to these ancient churches have to say to us today as a church in Charlotte, NC in 2023.

And with each week we've landed with sort of a gut-check question for us to consider for our hearts and our lives.

- Week 1 – Ephesus – “Have you abandoned your love for Christ?”
- Week 2 – Smyrna – “Are you willing to suffer for Jesus?”

This week we're continuing up to the top of the map to look together at the letter to the church in Pergamum.

### Background to Pergamum

**Pergamum** as a city can best be described as a place of **political prominence** and **pagan worship**.

#### **Political Prominence:**

Pergamum was the official capital of Asia Minor for 200+ years. Roman historian Pliny called it “the most distinguished city in Asia.” It was extremely loyal to Rome and to the worship of the Roman emperor.

In those days, if you wanted to host the ancient olympics, you had to promise to build a magnificent temple marked for the Roman Emperor as a sign of your loyalty and allegiance. Where folks could come when they were visiting the games and worship and make sacrifices to “Caesar as Lord.” Pergamum won the honor twice in 10 years. So this place is steeped in the false worship of the emperor. And because of that it had massive amounts of political prominence and power.

#### **Pagan Worship:**

It was also a city of pagan worship as well. So they not only worshiped the Roman emperor, they also worshiped the Roman gods.

One of the main Roman gods in the city of Pergamum was **Dionysus**. As often as monthly, the people would gather in this giant amphitheater right outside the temple to Dionysus. And there would be this giant concert full of cymbals and horns, just this massive wave of sound. And then when it ended, the goal of everyone in attendance was to get as drunk as possible and then do whatever you needed or wanted to do to attain a level of ecstasy and pleasure where it was like your soul was leaving your body, and then Dionysus, the god of pleasure and parties would be pleased with you.



***This place is so wicked, so steeped in the worship of false gods, Jesus himself is going to say in this letter Pergamum is Satan's dwelling place.***

*I mean can you imagine – “Hey y'all, we got a letter from John, but He says it's the words of Jesus. This is exciting, let's see what it says!” “You live in the homeland of satan.” Awesome...*

Now hearing all that, you are probably thinking – that sounds familiar. Doesn't that sound exactly like another church we just learned about last week – Smyrna. Pagan culture. Worship of the emperor. That's bad news for the Christians, right? That means if they're not willing to worship and declare “Caesar is Lord” – they can't participate in the economy, they are ostracized and outcast from their neighbors, they are most likely facing the threat of persecution and suffering and death for their faith.

### **Rev 2:12-13 – Suffering**

**And if you're thinking that...you'd be partially right. That's the first part of this letter.**

**12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. (we'll come back to that near the end) 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.**

Jesus starts by telling the church in Pergamum – I see what you're going through. I see what you're facing. I know where you dwell. I know that with all the temples and worship of these false roman gods, the worship of the emperor, I know it's like you're in the throne room of satan himself. And I know that it is hard for you. I see how you're suffering.

He references Antipas. We don't know a lot about him, historical accounts point to him being the pastor of this church a few years earlier. He got in trouble because he was going around casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and so they locked him in a bronze bull contraption and basically cooked him to death.

And Jesus is encouraging this church – I saw that even when they took your leader and led him to a horrific suffering death, you did not deny the faith. Just like with Smyrna – Jesus says I see your suffering. I know it. I'm here with you in it.

### **Balaam + Nicolaitians**

**And yet...here's where the letter heads in a different direction. Verse 14...**

**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.**

Alright let me help us make sense of what's happening here. Jesus says I see you're suffering and some of you are holding fast. Holding strong, remaining faithful. But I've got this against you – there are some who hold not to the name of Jesus but to the teaching of Balaam. And there are some who hold, not to the name of Jesus but to the teaching of the Nicolaitians.

Let's chat for a minute about these two groups...

## **Balaam**

Balaam was a prophet (meaning He spoke to God's people on behalf of God) who lived 1400 years earlier in the nation of Israel. His story can be found all the way back in *Numbers 22*. It's an incredible story, there's a talking donkey, and an angel from heaven...it's quite fascinating, more than we have time to dive into today.

The main point is emphasized here by Jesus – At first Balaam was a godly prophet – followed the Lord, spoke true and right things, but after a while he gave in to temptation. He is offered wealth and prosperity from the king if he will tell the Israelites it's ok to participate in the sexual immorality and idolatry of the broader culture that surrounds them.

Peter actually references him in his rant about false teachers in 2 Peter 2. He says this:

### **2 Peter 2:15**

**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.**

In other words – the teachings of Balaam are – **Do whatever you want, as long as it makes you feel good.**

Doesn't matter what the will of God is. Doesn't matter what He has told you is his design for sex. It doesn't matter what he has commanded you to do or not do.

**What matters is what you want. What matters is what feels good.** What matters is you getting to do the things you want to do.

That false teaching is catching on in the church at Pergamum – you can go participate in the Dionysus parties. Totally ok. If it makes you feel good. If it helps you build relationships with your neighbors. If it'll help your business. If it'll help you not be so ostracized for your Christian faith. Keep worshiping Jesus, for sure, just like participate some in what everyone else is doing.

Jesus says to Pergamum, there are some within your church that are following these teachings. Just like Balaam, they love gain from wrongdoing.

## **Nicolatians**

The Nicolatians are slightly different but similar outcomes. The Nicolatians are a group which was started by a man named Nicolaus. Nicolaus was one of the first deacons chosen in the church in Acts 6. He was given a position of prominence because he was a man of character, a man who was ready to serve. But over the years, he started to have some theological shifts.

He started believing and then teaching what has often been referred to in the church as **Antinomianism**. Anti-Nomos. Anti-Law.

Antinomianism is a false teaching that says this – ***If salvation is a free gift from God, if we are saved by grace through faith, it doesn't really matter then how you live because God accepts you anyways.***

That was the teaching of the Nicolatians – **Do whatever you want, Jesus is full of love and grace.**

And there were some within the church at Pergamum who were teaching this false doctrine – It doesn't matter who you sleep with. It doesn't matter if you participate in the Dionysus parties. It doesn't matter how plastered you got. It doesn't matter if you worship these false gods just a smidge...as long as you love Jesus, He loves you too. It's not about works, it's about grace! Do whatever you want.

That's what the gospel means. Christian freedom! Do whatever you want, Jesus loves you anyways. After all...God is love. ***It sounds appealing on the surface, except it directly contradicts the Bible.***

**Look at Romans 6:1-2 – Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?**

The gospel is the good news we're not just freed from the penalty of sin, but also from the power of sin. Because salvation is by grace through faith, we now *can live holy lives in Christ*.

### Compromise

So you see, although they come at it from different angles, different false teachings, different false beliefs...both groups in the church at Pergamum land at the same spot – **compromise**.

Both groups are trying to have one foot in both camps – how do I worship Jesus, make sure I'm good with Jesus, I'll do the church things, Christian thing, all of that and then also how do I get to live in the world in all the various ways I want to as well.

**Here's what Satan is doing** – he can't get the church in Pergamum from the outside, right? They're standing firm in suffering, they're not relenting their faith in the midst of persecution, so what does he do? He starts little cracks from within.

Maybe if I can just get them to rethink what God says about sex. Maybe if I can just get them to rethink what God says about holiness. Maybe if I can just get them to give in just a little bit. A little "Jesus-AND" kind of faith.

- Jesus-AND sacrificing everything for the sake of my career.
- Jesus-AND a little bit of anger but like only when I'm really annoyed.
- Jesus-AND fooling around with my boyfriend or girlfriend just a little bit.

The church at Pergamum is compromising. They want a Jesus-AND life.

- Hey, we can just go to the Dionysus party, we don't have to participate.
- Ok, ok we can participate but just like a little bit.
- Ok, I know we shouldn't dive all in but Jesus died for us and God loves us and it feels good and God created me so surely he wouldn't give me desires and then tell me I can't act on them...so what's the problem?

**Compromise.**

### Compromise is a Big Deal

**Here's the problem...for the church at Pergamum, and for us...Jesus does not tolerate compromise.**

What to us is "no-big-deal, it's just a little compromise"...is an incredibly big deal to our Savior.

Look back at v12+16 – **12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword...16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.**

**Jesus hates compromise.**

The two-edged sword points back to the picture of Jesus in Revelation 1. The one who John says has a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. It's a way of saying – Jesus is the one who definitively, righteously, and fairly judges all mankind.

So Jesus tells the church at Pergamum – you're compromising, but I come as the judge. I am the one who knows the actions and hearts of mankind. I am the one who sees your life, sees your heart, sees the ways you rebel against me.

Stop compromising. Stop thinking these little things are no big deal. Stop trying to keep a foot in camp Jesus and a foot in camp sinful desires and wants. You can't do it, and if you continue, Jesus says... **I'm coming with judgment, and a sword, to wage war on those in the church who would compromise.**

**Now you might be thinking... woah. That is a lot. It seems like almost an overreaction. I thought Jesus was loving and kind and merciful, but he's going to wage war on those who compromise just a little bit.**

Why does it matter if we have a little compromise here and there? I mean the church at Pergamum is literally having their lives threatened for following Jesus, can they not have a little bit of fun every once in a while.

Well I'm glad you asked. I believe the Scriptures point to 2 main reasons why Jesus takes compromise so seriously.

### **1. He is jealous for His glory.**

When you and I put our faith in Christ, when we are captured by His grace and trust in Him as Savior and Lord, He makes a claim over us as His possession. And this is a good thing, a glorious thing. We were His enemies, now we're His people. We had no home, now we are set to inherit a kingdom. We were slaves to sin, and He set us free.

But part of that means He sits on the throne of our hearts and our lives, and as we live and move and have our being in the world it's meant to point to Him. To give Him glory. To declare to the world around us how awesome and holy and might Jesus is.

**And Jesus, because He is jealous for us and jealous for His name, will not share our hearts with any compromise.**

**James 4:4-5 says this really clearly – 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. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, "He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us"?**

Jesus will not tolerate us compromising with sin. Even what seems little to us, even what seems like "no big deal", Jesus will not share the throne with any false god, no matter how "little" that god might be.

He is jealous for His name and His glory in us and so He will not tolerate sharing our hearts with anything or anyone else. He wants all of us in purity, holiness, and unadulterated love. He desires and deserves the glory through our lives.

### **2. He wants to protect us from destruction.**

Though compromise may start small, it always ends in destruction.

**Because here's how compromise works...it's a 4-step process...**

- **Step 1** – Compromise a little bit...

- **Step 2** – Increase the compromise slowly but gradually...
- **Step 3** – Justify away the Holy Spirit and our conscience...
- **Step 4** – Destruction...

#### Gossip:

- I'm just gonna gossip a little bit...
- Ok maybe just like one more joke at their expense...
- I know I shouldn't gossip about that person, **BUT** they were kind of mean to me and it's bonding me with this new friend and that friend doesn't know Jesus so really I'm just building a relationship with them for the sake of the gospel...
- Wait, why am I suddenly so alone?

#### Pornography:

- I know it's got some questionable content, but I'm just gonna try out this TV show and see what it's about...
- Oh I really like this show, maybe I'll just watch a little more...
- Ok I know I know that show doesn't help me with my lustful thoughts, **BUT** it has great cultural commentary and I see the gospel underneath the story line and it helps me engage with my coworkers who talk about it...
- Wait, why am I addicted to pornography?

#### Anger:

- I only lashed out at my spouse one time...
- Ok maybe it's starting to become a pattern...
- Ok I know I can't get so angry every single time they do something I don't like, **BUT** I'm really stressed at work. And I just feel misunderstood. And I've been so busy lately I haven't had any time for myself and besides like it was totally probably maybe potentially righteous anger, isn't there some passage about that...
- Wait, why do my spouse and I hate each other?

**Every small compromise left unchecked ends in destruction. And Jesus wants to protect His people from destruction.**

And you might be thinking I'm exaggerating for effect. Church, trust me, I wish I was....

**Pastor Friends.** Next summer will be a decade of vocational church ministry for me. And I've come to the point where the list of friends that I have who have failed their way out of ministry is getting close to passing those who are still in. And it's heartbreaking. It's genuinely painful every time I get the text or the phone call – "I need to update you with some really bad news about so and so." I mean just a few weeks ago I found out about a friend of mine who had been stealing money from his church. He's out of ministry, that's it, done. It's tragic. It breaks my heart, it really does.

And one of the things that is blatantly obvious with every single one of the stories is that it never starts with someone blowing up their life. It never starts with destruction, it always starts with a little compromise.

I remember after getting the news last year about another close friend who had failed out of ministry, and just the level of shock this particular circumstance brought. And Lindsay and I shortly after had a conversation and she said "what's scary is that it can happen to any of us." And I remember processing that with a friend of mine and his rebuttal was so jarring and yet so encouraging. He said "On the one hand that's true. Sin is deceptive, our hearts are fickle, we can all blow up our lives, pastors or not. On the other hand, this didn't 'catch him' as if he woke up one day and surprise, a moral failure. He didn't afford himself years and years of opportunities to walk back the compromise before it got to that point."

***It's not the one big decision that ruins your life. It's the 1,000 tiny decisions that lead to the one decision.***

And in case you're not sure about the anecdotal evidence, this is James 1:14-15 – **14 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.**

**Every small compromise left unchecked ends in destruction. And Jesus wants to protect His people from destruction.**

### **Command**

Jesus hates compromise. He hates it because He wants the lives of His people to bring Him glory, and He hates because He doesn't want it to lead to destruction in our lives. And so Jesus says in verse 16... **repent.**

That's the command of Jesus to the church at Pergamum – **stop compromising and repent.**

***What does this mean?***

***Repentance means we confess what seems "little" to us.***

We are so passionate about confessing our sins on a regular basis here at Citizens. People that are new always ask – Why do I have to confess stuff this week? What if nothing really happened. It's just little stuff.

**Listen – we confess the "little stuff" to help us fight our sin before it gets to the "big stuff."** We confess the compromise, before we have to confess the destruction.

So don't be frustrated when someone in your group keeps pushing in about that little anger issue. That little unforgiveness thing. That little porn thing. They aren't doing that to pick at you or shame you or judge you or make you feel bad, they're doing that in love because they want to cut off the future destruction before it even starts down the path.

Don't wait for the thing to blow up.

- Maybe you didn't scream your head off at your spouse, but you felt silently irritable with them when they forgot to do something they said they'd do. Confess that.
- Maybe you didn't binge drink all weekend, but you had one too many and you knew it was a way to escape and relax instead of finding rest in Jesus. Confess that.

***Repentance means we make a plan to fight against our sin.***

We look for repeated patterns, we bring our Community Group in to help us make a plan. Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, right? So if we keep giving in to compromise, we need to change up what we're doing. So we make a plan – when I'm tempted this is who I will call. I will avoid these places because it's too much temptation for me. Make a plan.

***Repentance means we take a step by the power of the Holy Spirit.***

It's an action-oriented reorientation. So if you keep compromising, but you don't take any action steps towards dealing with the behavior. I'm not saying perfection, I mean an action towards fighting against the compromise...you might feel bad, but you haven't repented. Repentance means taking a step.

**That's the command from Jesus, stop compromising with the teachings of Balaam. Stop compromising with the teachings of the Nicolaitans. Stop compromising with your sin. How? By repenting.**

### Promise

**But again if you stop there, I want us to get this – we can't stop at the command. If we do...burden. DO BETTER. Stop compromising you sinner! Which, just so we're clear, is the command from Jesus. Repent.**

**But here's the good news...**

**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.'**

Now at first you might be like...wait what? Manna and a stone? What is the promise here? **Let me explain...**

- **Manna** – Bread from heaven. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert, God rained down bread from heaven. Jesus, pointing to that manna, told the hungry crowds on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, "I am the bread of life (I am the true manna). Eat and you will never be hungry."
- **A White Stone** – As I mentioned earlier Pergamum was a two-time host of the ancient olympics. And one of the traditions at the olympics was if you won an event, you received a white marble stone. And this stone was the entrance ticket for the giant banquet they would hold at the end of the games.
- **A New Name** – A new name. Jesus says those who conquer are given a name from Jesus Himself. Given a new identity from Jesus Himself.

**You see what we're looking for in every compromise is what sin offers but cannot give:**

- **Satisfaction** – that our souls would be content. That we would be satisfied and not craving anymore.
- **Intimacy/Welcome** – a place to belong. When we tell that joke, make that comment, go to that place – we're just wanting someone to say – you belong here. Welcome home.
- **Identity** – We want something or someone to say over us "you're enough."

Sin offers us all of these things – satisfaction, intimacy, identity. It lies and it says it can give us these realities that our souls crave at a deep level. And we believe the lies and so we compromise, and we search, and we try.

But Jesus says to the one who conquers, to the one who repents from their compromise, the one who trusts in Christ Jesus for life now and life forever...he offers:

- Bread from heaven. Everlasting satisfaction found in Him, the bread of life. Jesus gives all who trust in Him the gift of Himself, which brings the satisfaction our craving souls long for.
- A white stone entrance ticket. You know that welcome you are searching for, you know that home you're longing for when you compromise and run to sin. That's on offer for all who conquer. You'll get entrance into the banquet, the marriage supper of the lamb. The giant party and feast and celebration that is promised one day to all who trust in Christ.
- A new identity. You know how you're trying to be something, earn something. You know all of your searching and compromising looking for an identity from the world. What about a new name from Jesus Himself. Loved. Son. Daughter. Chosen. Forgiven. Redeemed. Reconciled. Adopted. Sealed. Desired. Beloved. Mine.

**Christ offers to the one who conquers – all of the things sin promises but cannot deliver.**



**Satisfaction. Intimacy. Identity. All on offer through the cross. Through His life, death, and resurrection.**

Offered to us freely, not so that we'll run around and do whatever we want. But that we might live in His love and His enoushness forever.

### Conclusion

So let me end as we've been doing with a question – **Where are you compromising with sin?**

Do you sense the invitation from Jesus?

- Christians
- Non-Christians

**Pray.**