



October 21st, 2025
Week 6

¹² “Write to the angel of the church in Pergamum: Thus says the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword: ¹³ I know where you live—where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ So repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

¹⁷ “Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is inscribed that no one knows except the one who receives it.

In his message to the church in Pergamum Jesus speaks an amazingly relevant word to us and to other disciples who seek to be faithful in a post-modern, pluralistic culture.

Why does Jesus present himself to the Pergamum church the way he does?

“The One who has the sharp two-edged sword” (2:12).

“I will come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (2:16).

Why does Jesus use this imagery and language here?

Well, for one thing, the symbol for the city of Pergamum was the sword, for Pergamum was “one of the few cities to which Rome had given ‘the right of the sword,’ the power to inflict capital punishment.”

Yet, I want to ask, why does the One we call “the Prince of Peace” employ this language of war?

1. Why does Jesus speak as though he were a soldier ready for combat?

John R. W. Stott, the British pastor-scholar, captures the situation in Pergamum when he writes, “Here a pitched battle was being fought, in which the soldiers were not men but *ideas*.” The church in Pergamum, like the church in Rome and Stockholm, Washington and Manila, New Delhi and Los Angeles, was engaged in a battle for the _____.

The outcome of every other kind of battle hinges on the outcome of this battle. For as the writer of Proverbs puts it, **“As people think within themselves so are they.”** Clinical psychologist Archibald Hart says we are “the sum total of our thoughts.”

“I will make war with the sword of my mouth” (2:16).

The battle for the mind in Pergamum was being waged on two fronts. *First*, ideas that conflict with God’s revelation in Jesus Christ were bombarding the church from the _____; and *second*, ideas that conflict with God’s revelation in Jesus Christ were pressuring the church from the _____. The church was under overt attack from the outside and under covert pressure from the inside.

Because Jesus stands **“in the middle”** of the churches, the risen Lord knows the situation better than the disciples in Pergamum themselves. **“I know where you dwell,”** he says (2:13). And he knows that they were holding fast on the first front but were losing ground on the second. They were standing firm against the overt pressure of the pagan city, but they were either unaware of, or carelessly tolerant of, the covert pressure coming from *within* the Christian fellowship.

This is the way it has been throughout Christian history. *Most growing Christians are relatively able to spot and resist ideas that are blatantly contrary to God’s will and way.* It is the ideas that come to us wrapped in religious language which are more difficult to spot and resist.

That is why it is sometimes harder to be a faithful disciple in a country with a “Christian veneer” than it is in a country that militantly opposes Jesus and his way. In the latter

case the lines between truth and error are very clearly drawn. There clearly is no middle ground.

Jesus straightforwardly lays out his assessment of the city of Pergamum. ***"I know where you dwell,"*** he says, ***"where Satan has his throne"*** (2:13). What? Why did Jesus say that? The evil one has henchmen in every city. Why say that Pergamum is the city where "Satan sits enthroned?"

In every way Pergamum was a center for ideas that blinded people to the truth—the truth about God, about the world, about themselves. While the average tourist was blissfully taking pictures of all of the expressions of idolatry, Jesus grieved. In his message he is saying that in that particular place the evil one had some major victories. The one Jesus called "the Deceiver" had the mind of a whole city: *from politics to medicine to religion*.

Jesus commends the church for standing firm against the constant bombardment of ideas contrary to the gospel. ***"You remain true to my name,"*** he says (2:13).

That there even was a church in that city is a testimony to the power of the gospel. A clear and passionate presentation of the person and work of Jesus Christ broke through the superstition and idolatry and won the hearts and minds of many people. And even when forces tried to stamp out the church by killing one of its leaders (Antipas 2:13), the church stood and grew! The church in Pergamum confirms the old saying: "Trying to stamp out the gospel is like hammering a nail—the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes!"

Yet Jesus had a serious complaint against that church. While the Christians of Pergamum were resisting the influence from without, they were *carelessly indifferent* to the influence from _____. Jesus says: ***"I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam. You also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans"*** (2:14,15).

Although the church was being vigilant on the front lines it was tolerating a Trojan horse in its midst.

And Jesus exhorts them to deal with it. ***"Repent"*** he says, ***"or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them [the people with the false ideas] with the sword of my mouth"*** (2:16).

Why does Jesus speak this way? Why is Jesus so intolerant? In our day tolerance is exalted as a great virtue, especially on moral and religious matters. Here Jesus presents himself as passionately intolerant. Why?

Because He loves the truth, He speaks the truth, He is the truth. And because, as he claims elsewhere, falsehood and deception of *any kind* _____. Jesus is passionately intolerant because he is passionately intolerant of people being enslaved.

Yes, he is deeply grieved when people are imprisoned by illness or poverty or political oppression. But what grieves him the most is people who are imprisoned by *false ideas, false pre-suppositions about the world, ourselves and God. He is especially intolerant of false ideas being taught and perpetuated in* _____.

So Jesus calls the church in Pergamum to repent of its careless tolerance. For, as he says elsewhere, only the truth can set us free (John 8:32). We live fully human lives to the degree that we see ourselves as we really are, to the degree that we see the world as it really is, and to the degree that we see *God as God really is*.

We learn from this message (and in the message at the church in Thyatira) that tolerance is *not a biblical virtue*. _____ is. _____ is. _____ is. _____ is. _____ is. *But not* _____.

2. For what is the first word of the gospel? What was the first word out of Jesus' mouth as He begins His public ministry?

Repent simply means "to stop, turn around—you are heading in the wrong direction." The word is metanoia—"think again" or "change your mind."

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 pre-suppositions, 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 thinking of Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Romans: **"Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind"** (12:2).*

Jesus is so intolerant of the false ideas influencing the church because any form of falsehood makes for bondage. And thankfully he will not tolerate people being in bondage!

He labels the false ideas infiltrating the Pergamum church **"the teaching of Balaam"** and **"the teaching of the Nicolaitans."** The two groups were probably spreading the same ideas. Nicolaitans is a Greek word, Balaam a Hebrew word. And they mean the same thing. "Nicolas" is made up of two words: *nikan*, meaning "conqueror" or "lord;" and *laos*, meaning "the people." "Balaam" is made up of two words: *Baal*, meaning "conqueror" or "lord"; and *am*, meaning "the people." Both groups are appropriately named because both sought to *conquer the minds of the people*.

What were they teaching? Among other things, that it was okay for Christians to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to have sexual intercourse outside the bonds of the one man, one woman, life-covenant we call marriage. As we know from the rest of the New Testament, both problems—eating meat sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality—were major issues for first-century Christians.

People in that day would bring an animal to the temple of their favorite god. Part of the animal would be offered to that god and part was given back to the worshippers so that they could hold a sacred feast in honor of that god. When people became Christians, when they said yes to Jesus Christ as God, they faced a major dilemma. Friends and members of their families who had not yet come to Jesus would invite them to join them in the feasts. *"Should a disciple go? And should she or he eat?"* became major social-spiritual issues.

And sexuality became a major issue. The sexually super-charged atmosphere of our modern cities is nothing compared to that of the first century! Someone has said that chastity was one of the completely new virtues that the gospel introduced into the ancient world. One ancient writer said: "We have prostitutes for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately, and for having a faithful guardian of our household affairs."

Both issues figured in the first Ecumenical Council the church held, the so-called Jerusalem Council, described in _____. The Council laid down what it considered to be the minimum expressions of loyalty to Jesus. Here is the decree:

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, and from things strangled, and from sexual immorality; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well" (Acts 15:28-29).

The Balaamite-Nicolaitans were teaching the exact opposite! They were arguing that it was okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to give oneself to any sexual practice as long as it did not hurt anyone else.

Consider the first issue: "eating food sacrificed to idols." The problem here is that the Balaamite-Nicolaitans misunderstood the nature of reality. What do I mean?

"Ah," say the Balaamite-Nicolaitans, and most of us modern-day Christians, "idols are nothing" (1 Cor 10:19). There is no god in the wood or stone. So how could anyone be forming a bond with another god?

The New Testament answer? You are right: the wood is wood, the stone is stone. And you are right: the meat sacrificed at the feast and later sold in the market is just meat. But what you fail to understand is that when you eat at the table in an idolatrous banquet something spiritual is happening. Yes, the idol is nothing. But behind the idol, associated with the idol, lurks the presence and authority of unseen spiritual forces (Paul calls them "demons" in 1 Cor 10:20.)

Idolatry is evil primarily because it robbed the true God of the glory due him alone, but it was also evil because it meant that the person, engaged in a spiritual act and directing his worship toward something other than the one true God, was brought into intimate relation with the lower, the evil, spiritual powers.

And that is why Jesus Christ is passionately intolerant of the teachings of the Balaamite-Nicolaitans. That is why he says he *hates* their ideas (2:6). They misunderstood the nature of reality. We are physical creatures living in a physical universe. But we are also spiritual creatures living in a spiritual universe. And in this spiritual universe there is a battle going on. Every inch is a battlefield. There is no _____.

Consider the other issue Jesus addresses in his message to the church in Pergamum. The Balaamite-Nicolaitans had developed a theology that justified sexual immorality. Why does Jesus hate this theology? Because he is down on sex? No. He created us as sexual beings. He hates their theology because the teaching buys into a basic misunderstanding of the human body.

The word the New Testament uses is _____. The soma is *"not only the material form, it is also the imperishable form of the personality."* The soma is the real self, the whole person. The fact is, human beings do not have a soma, *we are a soma*. I do not have a body, I am a body. My body is not a house or prison for my real self. My body is my real self.

Therefore, what I do with my body I do with me. What I do to my body I do to me. My body may be my outer self and my soul my inner self, but both are the same self.

It follows that far more than biology is involved in any sex act. The act involves the soma, the real self, the very essence of a person's being. Which is why two people seldom feel the same way toward each other afterward. They have shared more than biology; they have shared their "somas," their very persons. And that is what the Balaamite-Nicolaitans failed to understand.

"The prostitute," writes Lewis Smedes, "sells her body with an unwritten understanding that nothing personal will be involved in the deal. The buyer gets his sexual needs satisfied without having anything personally difficult to deal with afterwards. He pays his dues and they are done with each other." Both, however, fail to grasp the fundamental nature of the act. "The reality of the act, unfelt and unnoticed by them is this: it unites them—body and soul—to each other." So Smedes writes:

There is no such thing as casual sex, no matter how casual people are about it. The Christian assaults reality in his night out at the brothel ... Nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside. . . . The demand for self-restraint is not a kill-joy rule plastered on the abundant life by anti-sexual saints. It is respect for reality.

And that is why Jesus is passionately intolerant with the teachings of the Balaamite-Nicolaitans. That is why he hates their teaching. They failed to appreciate the nature of the human body. It is more than flesh and blood. It is my real self. And I violate my real self when I use my body contrary to the revealed _____.

How the Lord of Life grieves over the cities of our world. Not simply because we disobey God's good law, but because in disobeying we break with reality—even the reality of ourselves. And God grieves.

Do we grieve? Or have we been seduced into careless indifference? Have we become so callous that we carelessly tolerate the violation of personhood?

Which is why Jesus' strong warning in this message is grace. He says: ***"I will come and fight against them with the sword of my mouth."*** ***"I will fight."*** Good news! Jesus does not stand by carelessly.

3. How did the Balaamite-Nicolaitans' position even get through the church door in Pergamum?

It was wrapped in the language of the gospel. The Balaamite-Nicolaitans had not denied Jesus outright. They were likely saying something like this: "Look, you belong to Jesus. How can anything hurt you? You have been baptized! You have eaten from the Lord's Table! Nothing can affect your relationship with him." Such a position reflects a misunderstanding of God's grace. Grace does not protect us when we willfully choose to disobey. We can get hurt.

The Balaamite-Nicolaitans also probably argued that since Christians have been set free from law they are free to do whatever they please. After all, did not Paul say, ***"Where sin increased, grace super-abounded"*** (Rom 5:21). Let us then sin that grace may abound!

That position also misunderstands God's grace. Yes, grace welcomes us with open arms. Yes, grace forgives us when we repent—again and again and again. But grace also transforms us. *Grace begins the process of repentance, of us turning around and becoming like the Holy One.*

Again, let me stress why Jesus is so passionately intolerant: _____. And to the degree that I see the world as it really is, to the degree that I see myself as I really am, to the degree that I see God's grace as it really is—to that degree I live a whole life. Jesus says: ***"You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"*** (John 8:32).

The Lord with the sword in his mouth makes two wonderful promises to those who repent and join him in his passion. First, ***"To the one who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna"*** (2:17).

Just as Israel was fed manna from heaven as she made her way toward the promised land, so the church will be fed as she makes her way toward the City of God. ***"I am the Bread of Life"*** Jesus says, ***"which comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world"*** (John 6:38, 51). He is saying to us, why are you fooling around eating at the

tables of lesser gods, when you can come to me and eat food that truly satisfies? I am the manna. Feed on me.

*Second, **"To the one who overcomes I will give a white stone, and a new name written on the stone, which no one knows but he who receives it"** (2:17).*

What is this gift? I know of at least nine different interpretations, each one having great merit. Perhaps the gift is so rich it involves all nine. The interpretation that makes the best sense to "Darrell Johnson" is the so called tessera hospitalis. When two friends were about to part they would divide a white stone in half. Each friend would inscribe his or her name on one of the halves and give it to the other.

It became the symbol of their friendship and the symbol of their promise to maintain that friendship as long as the stone lasted. Jesus is promising intimate friendship to those who _____.

His name on my half. My name written on his half. It is my new name that he writes—my new identity that he gives me. The promise is that we will know the fullness of his name even as he knows the fullness of ours. We shall know him even as he knows us (1 Cor 13:12).

How do we make it in this battle for the mind?

- (1) By humbly acknowledging that we do not have the corner on the truth.
- (2) By constantly opening ourselves to the sharp two-edged sword that comes from Jesus' mouth.
- (3) By humbling ourselves and constantly opening our minds to the living and active Word of God that is able to penetrate our distorted ideas and lead us to the truth that sets us free (Heb 4:12).

Here is the good news: Jesus Christ will not let us be captive to false ideas. He is fighting for our minds!

*Written portions are taken from "Discipleship on the Edge" by Darrell W. Johnson.