

Revelation 2:12-17 “Pergamum: The Church of Moral Laxity”

Dr. Jeffery L. Hamm, PhD
ChristChurch Presbyterian, Atlanta

In the city of Berlin, Germany, is located the Pergamum Museum—visited by over a million people per year. In the 19th century the German Empire financed the excavations of significant sites from all over the ancient world. So the museum was constructed in order to house these collections—like the Ishtar Gate of Babylon. The most famous artifact, however, which the museum contains is that after which the museum is named—the Pergamum Altar; excavated in one of the most gorgeous and impressive cities of antiquity. Yet also one of the most evil, eerie, and dark: Pergamum, also known as the “throne of Satan”—the city before us in our text today. When we examine the text, we learn that *since Christ is the reigning Lord of the cosmos, then the church should never grow lax in morality.*

Context

Repetition is the mother of learning. So allow me to repeat that the *Apocalypse* should be read as a series of seven visions that span the entire time from the 1st coming of Christ until the 2nd coming; parallel visions. Each of these seven cycles depicts the same spiritual war, each from a different perspective. Like different camera angles filming the same football game. Each replay shows the same game from a different angle. Yet they are not boring reruns. There is a progression in the parallel visions; taking us deeper and deeper into the mysterious plan of God. We are in the first vision which runs from chapters 1-3. A shocking, traumatizing vision of the glorified Christ among the seven golden lampstands, identified as the seven churches to which Jesus commands John to write. These seven churches are historical congregations in the Roman Empire’s province of Asia, modern Turkey. The concerns addressed in the letters are not limited to the actual seven churches, but apply all churches in the 1st century; to those not listed like Corinth, Thessalonica, Colossae. The number seven is symbolic, conveying the idea of perfection, completion. So the principles apply to all the churches throughout the ages: ancient Turkey, Greece, to modern Germany and the U.S.

The City and Church of Pergamum

3rd of these seven. Verse 12, “and to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:” The city of Pergamum is about 40 miles up the coast of the Aegean Sea from Smyrna, and 10 miles inland, up the Caicus River. Pliny states that Pergamum is “by far the most distinguished city in Asia” (Mounce, 78). The name *Pergamum* comes from the Greek word for “citadel.” Exactly what Pergamum is. The city is built on a mountain towering 1,000 feet over the Caicus River valley. Dominating the city’s skyline, are the shrines and temples of four cults. Pergamum is the religious center for four of the pagan gods of Greek pantheon. One, Zeus. The famous throne-like temple of Zeus overshadows the city from the mountain top. There are also shrines to the goddess Athena, and the gods Dionysus and Asclepius, the god of “healing”: the chief god of Pergamum. Because of his healing power, Asclepius is given the title, *Soter*; “Savior.” The shrine of the Savior Asclepius attracts people from all over the world who came here to study medicine. The *Asclepion* is a teaching hospital, medical school/health spa to which Caesar even

comes for treatment and healing. Interestingly, the symbol of Asclepius is a serpent. Still used on medical emblems today; the serpent winding around a pole. The serpent is the Savior of Pergamum. Of course, from Genesis 3 to Revelation 20 the serpent is the symbol of Satan. In Pergamum, the serpent symbol of Satan is worshipped as the savior of mankind.

In addition to this demonic religion, Pergamum is also home of the imperial cult, emperor worship. In 29 BC, Caesar erected a temple to himself, to “the divine Augustus and the goddess of Rome.” So Pergamum is the first city to be granted permission to build a temple for the worship of a living emperor. This temple was followed by temples to emperors Trajan and Severus. Three temples dedicated to the worship of the emperor. Although emperor worship began in Smyrna in 195 BC, by the time John writes 300 years later, Pergamum has surpassed Smyrna to become the leading city that worships Caesar as a *god*. Therefore Pergamum is rewarded the honor of becoming the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Here in Pergamum is the seat of the Roman governor, later in Revelation the government itself being the beast who emerges from the sea to whom the dragon gives authority to be worshipped. So the Christians in Pergamum find themselves in an utterly diabolical, demonic, dark, pagan culture.

The toxic environment has earned Pergamum a special nickname. Verse 13, *I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is*. Emphasized again at the end of the verse, *...where Satan dwells*. The city slogan for Pergamum is the “throne of Satan.” So called because of the combination of these pagan influences. The throne-like temple of Zeus overlooking the city, the home of the worship the Greek god Asclepius, Serpent-Savior. In addition, the headquarters of emperor worship, the location of the very chair/throne of the Roman governor. All of which gives Pergamum the city slogan “throne of Satan.” Satan is described as a roaring lion, searching to and fro, seeking those whom he can devour. But when he is done stalking, he returns to his lair in Pergamum.

So what does Christ say to these Pergamene believers? Evacuate the city, flee? No. Verse 13, *I know where you dwell...* Very significant. Each of the letters follows a structure: an introduction, evaluation, commendation, criticism, command, promise. In the introduction to the other six churches Jesus says, *I know your works*. To the church in Ephesus, 2:2, *I know your works*. To the church in Thyatira, 2:19, *I know your works*. Yet to the church in Pergamum, Jesus doesn’t say, *I know your works*. Instead, *I know where you dwell...* Pergamum is the single most challenging place to live as a Christian. Still Christ does not tell them to leave the evil city. Nor to buy a few city blocks and build Christian compound enclosed and guarded by gates that keep out the world. Christ acknowledges that these Christians are directed by His providence to live in Pergamum. It is their city, from which their families originate; where they were born, where their homes are. Jesus doesn’t tell them to relocate. Instead Jesus wants His church to engage the world. High Priestly pray, *I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one*. Christ prays that His church be kept from the evil one in order that it might transform the world, as a change-agent. the salt of the earth, a light in this present darkness. By Jesus’ power, He asserts, *I shall build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it*. The Pergamenes have been used by Christ to do exactly that. They remain in the city where Satan dwells to proclaim the gospel at the very gates of hell where Satan’s throne is, Pergamum. Here in the city of deepest demonic darkness, dominated by the devil, there is a little fortress for Christ: a small gathering of believers, the *church* of Pergamum.

Commendation

For their faithfulness, Jesus commends them. Verse 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 commends the Pergamenes for their faithfulness. They have kept the faith in an utterly Satanic city that is hostile to the faith. They did not deny the faith even in the most extreme persecution.

That to which Jesus draws attention: their past persecution. The light of Christ came to the dark city like Pergamum. Darkness and light cannot coexist. Mutually exclusive. Light expels darkness. Yet in a dark place like Pergamum, the expulsion is violent. For the light of Christ is blinding, blistering. Causing instinctive reaction from the citizens who love darkness; oppose light. So when the gospel came to Pergamum it brought bitter persecution against the Christians.

It reached its zenith in the days of Antipas (v. 13). We don't know anything else about him from the New Testament. He is mentioned by the church father Tertullian. According to tradition, Antipas was the pastor of Pergamum, ordained and installed by the Apostle John. One who shook the city, to the extent that the pagan priests complained to the governor about him. The governor ordered him to recant his faith in Christ. To burn incense to Caesar in an act of worship and confess that Caesar is Lord. He refused. So Antipas was executed in a very horrific way at the Pergamum Altar—the altar of Zeus—now located in Berlin.

How? By being slowly roasted to death in torture device: a brazen bowl designed in the shape and size of an actual bull; four legs, head and horns, hollow, with a door in one side. The head of the bull was designed with a system of acoustic pipes and stops which convert the screams of the victim into the sounds of a bellowing bull. Antipas was bound and shoved inside. A huge fire was lit underneath the bull heating the bronze metal. As he slowly roasted to death his moans traveled through the acoustic pipes converting the sound into the bellowing of an alive, angry bull. Welcome to Pergamum, Christian. Last week, we considered the church in Smyrna: the church of impending death. Death has already been the experience of the Pergamenes. Of the seven historic churches, Pergamum is where martyrdom begins. This is the location of the throne of Satan, the single most challenging place to live as a Christian. Yet during this time of intense persecution, the Pergamenes did not renounce their faith in Christ. For their faithfulness, Jesus commends them.

Criticism

Pergamum would seem to be the perfect church, right? Wrong. Though Jesus commends them, He also criticizes them. For while refusing to deny Christ in the face of death, they do so indirectly by relaxing on truth. For that Jesus reserves the sharpest criticism. Verse 14, *But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam.* Again, Verse 15, *So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* Jesus criticizes the church for false teaching. In the Greek text, the word *teaching* is mentioned 3 times, stressing Jesus' urgent concern. Jesus criticizes the Pergamenes for allowing false teaching in their midst.

The criticism is not that the entire church has embraced it. But that the congregation allows it to go on among them. "Only a portion of the church has fallen prey to the pernicious doctrine of the Balaamites, but all are guilty of not taking action against their presence" (Mounce, 82).

The problem is the church doesn't do anything about the false teachers. The criticism is not against the doctrinal "waywardness of the minority, but the nonchalance of the majority" (Stott,

52). The majority doesn't care. They could care less. That is the focus: the nonchalant, careless attitude. The so-what attitude that allows the false teaching to exist in the congregation. Hoeksema, "The church in Pergamos has one characteristic which distinguishes it from the former two...the church in Pergamos bears with evil men, and therefore is the church which is growing lax in discipline" (82). Pergamum is the church of moral laxity.

The laxity comes into sharper focus when we examine the teaching of the heretics. What is the false doctrine? In Verse 15, it is identified with *the teaching of the Nicolaitans*. We don't know for certain who the Nicolaitans are. But we do know that these heretics also infiltrate the Ephesian church. In verse 6, Jesus commends the Ephesians, *You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*. Jesus hates Nicolaitanism. But what is hated by Christ and what is hated in Ephesus is allowed in Pergamum. The Pergamenes are the opposite of the Ephesians. The church in Ephesus would not allow false teaching. They test those who claimed to be apostles and are not. But in their pursuit of purity they lost their first love. In Pergamum, however, there is the inverse situation. The Pergamenes want to make love paramount and in so doing they allow false teaching. Like many today, doctrine divides, love unites. "It really doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you love. Stop hate-speech. Only love." Love at the expense of truth is not Christian love, sentimentalism. A person may experience fluttery feelings in one's heart and allow teaching that causes one to deny Christ.

What is this false teaching of the Nicolaitans? We don't have any of their books or reactions to them. We can't say definitively what they teach. But we do have a clue in verse 14. Verses 14 and 15 are in parallel. The teaching of the Nicolaitans parallels, mirrors the false teaching found in verse 14. Verse 14, *But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to 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*. The church in Pergamum is in danger of the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to entice Israel to sin. How? Eating food sacrificed to idols and committing sexual immorality. Idolatry and sexual immorality. Not two types of sin in different circumstances. But one and the same sin, simultaneously. The teaching of Balaam takes us back to the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites (Numbers 22-25, 31). The Israelites are across the Jordan River encamped on the plains of Moab. The King of Moab, Balak, sees the Israelite tents stretching to the horizon. He fears for the national security of Moab, "This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field" (Numb. 22:4). So on some sketchy website the king finds a prophet-for-hire. A bounty-hunter prophet, Balaam. The King of Moab offers to pay Balaam a house full of gold if he will curse the people of Israel. Yet every time Balaam opens his mouth to speak, God causes his words to be not those of cursing, instead blessing. The king is outraged at Balaam. Balaam says one of my favorite verses, *Must I not take care to speak what the Lord puts in my mouth?* (Numb. 23:12). This happens not once, but four times. Finally, greedy Balaam tells the King of Moab, "I can't curse them for you. But I can tell you how to get what you want. Let God do your crooked work for you. Get the Israelites to commit idolatry, and God will wipe them out for you." The King of Moab is happy to pay for this advice. There is just one question. How does he trick the Israelites into committing idolatry?

So Balaam presents his strategy: Seduce the Israelite men. Have the Moabite women seduce the Israelite men and enticingly lead them to an idolatrous feast. Entice them sexually to participate in idolatry. That is what happens. God's judgment fell upon them via a spreading plague. 24,000 are killed before the plague is checked. That only by the zeal of Phinehas who takes a spear and runs it through the leading couple as they were caught in the very act, joined in

sexual union in front of the statue of Baal. The idolatry is sexually immoral, sexual immorality is idolatrous. One and the same thing.

Idolatrous Immorality

This is the danger in which the church in Pergamum finds herself. Keep in mind the context of the Roman Empire. Every aspect of life, political, social, economic is tied to pagan religion. Every city, every school, every club, sports team, trade union has its own representative deity. Auto workers union has its own god. At the regular meeting, the members honor the god of cars. They rent out the back room of the restaurant and have a feast. They sacrifice an animal to the god of cars. Then the meat is served for dinner while special guests appear to promote the god of cars: Porsche prostitutes, Pontiac porn stars. The idolatry is sexually immoral, sexual immorality is idolatrous. One and the same thing. Yet when a man comes to faith in Christ, he wants the Lord's will in His life. *For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality* (1Th 4:3 NAS). For those coming to Christ, they want God's will—to abandon the sexual immorality of idolatry. They don't want to go to Hooter's after work with the office staff and feast to the goddess of computer software. Sexual immorality and idolatry are tied together. The new believers refuse to participate in idolatrous, sexual immorality, at the risk of losing their jobs, being banned from the marketplace, expelled from medical school, disowned by their family, or put to death. Here come the Nicolaitans, like Balaam before them. They teach laxity and entice to idolatrous, sexual immortality. "Look we know there is no such thing as an idol. An idol is nothing. So going to the idol feast, it is nothing. Eating idol meat is really nothing." (Which is true. The same problem existed in Corinth. Paul explained, "OK if you want to eat meat, then buy idol meat in the marketplace. Don't ask any questions for conscience sake. But don't dare go to the idol's temple to eat meat. One, it sends mixed messages. Two, you share in the table with demons"). Of course, the Nicolaitans just happen to forget that part. They urge laxity, "Relax, chill-out." As a result of this subtle deception, Christians are enticed to stray from Christ by those who teach that it is perfectly acceptable to worship Christ and participate in pagan practices. "OK to love Jesus, and go to the pornographic Zeus parade. It is on Peachtree Street. Everyone will be there. Jesus doesn't care. He wants us to be in the city."

Not exactly. There is more. *For what fellowship has light with darkness...Christ with Belial* (2 Cor. 6:14-15)? If a person considers Jesus to be one of many gods, one who doesn't care if he/she gives attention to Allah or Buddha, then he is not thinking of the Jesus of the Bible. What he has imagined is an idol of his own mind. Here is the Jesus of the Bible, the One John sees on the isle of Patmos. The staggering, breathtaking Christ of the cosmos *before whom the heavens and the earth shall flee His presence*. Because HE IS WHO HE IS, He cannot share His glory with any other. What taught in the first commandment, you shall have no other gods before Me. We are required to acknowledge the Lord as the one true God and worship and glorify Him alone. There can be no laxity! For the one who conquers, he will be given hidden manna—the bread from heaven in the wilderness wanderings. So likewise, the conquering Pergamene will receive heavenly bread at the eternal feast. Then a white stone, a token/ticket for entrance into the feast.

Correction

So is Jesus just so happy that the church gives Him some attention, as American Christians believe? No. Verse 16, *Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.* Jesus says repent, to reverse course. But repent of what? The sexual immorality and idolatry? No. Jesus is not speaking to the false teachers or those who embrace their teaching. Jesus is speaking to the congregation which allows it to exist in the first place. He urges the church to repent for allowing the false teachers to remain among them. For not taking action against them. Repent for allowing the heresy to spread like cancer throughout the church body and never doing anything about it. Repent for not exercising church discipline. “Repent or I will come in judgment.” What does that mean? Perhaps like the church in Corinth where God expelled some via sickness and death. Who knows? But if the church doesn’t repent and kick out the evil teachers then Jesus will come in judgment.

Can we hear the warning? Here are believers who are faithful, even in the face of death, like Antipas. Satan cannot tempt them by threat of a sword. They do not fear death! How does he get them to turn away from the Lord? Sexual immorality. So the question for us is: What do we allow within the church? What kind of sexually immoral false teaching? Jesus criticizes: Verse 14, *But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam.* The implication? “Nothing has been done about it!” Again in Verse 15, *So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* “Nothing has been done about it!” What do we allow to go on within the congregation? Do we allow twisted teaching about sexual immorality? What kind of sexually immoral false teaching? LGBTQ? LGBTQ+ What? Please don’t misunderstand. Of course, the LGBTQ community is most warmly welcome among whom are my own family and friends. Yet their teaching is not welcome. The reason for which Jesus criticizes the Pergamenes, idolatrous teaching about sexual immorality. Are we guarding the truth? Or shall we be the church which grows in moral laxity? Amen.