



to the
SEVEN CHURCHES
REVELATION 2:12-17

Sunday, Jun 5, 2022

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I. Introduction

Welcome

[Greeting, introduce myself, welcome guests, get your eyes on Revelation 2:12-17]

Before we wade into the sermon, would you pray with me?

Prayer

God, your word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. None of us are hidden from your sight, Lord. The depths of our hearts are exposed to you. You see the ways we need to be encouraged and the ways we need to be corrected. Please open our eyes to see your authority over us and your kindness to us in the gospel. Please soften our hearts and lead us to repentance for our good and your glory. Give us ears to hear what your Spirit says to the church. Amen.

Introduce Sermon Series

As a church we've been, for the past few weeks, looking at the first few chapters of the Book of Revelation and in particular, we've been working our way through the letters from Jesus to seven churches. And we've been spending time in this book because Revelation is a letter written to stoke the faithfulness and courage of God's people - for the churches that received it when it was written and for the church throughout history as we endure the sin and suffering of the world, waiting for Christ make to all things new.

And while other letters in the bible use clearly written commands or theological arguments to stoke the flames of faithfulness in God's people, the book of Revelation mostly uses visions - images and symbols, numbers and colors - to encourage and instruct the church. But before we get to most of those visions—Jesus gives us a sort of answer key to the themes of Revelation by applying those themes to these seven specific, literal churches that were scattered throughout modern day Turkey. And these letters are written to real churches, but they're also symbolic because the number "seven" is a symbolic number that represents the entire church, throughout all time. And so, while these churches are specific, literal churches, the issues that Jesus addresses among them, are common to the church as a whole.¹

¹ Sermon: "Smyrna" by Kyle Rodriguez

So a couple of weeks ago we looked at Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus where he called his people to persevere through trials and hold tightly to the truth without leaving behind their first love. Then last week Pastor Kyle preached through Jesus' letter to the church in Smyrna and the call from Jesus in that letter was simply, do not fear suffering. And this week we get to hear from Jesus as he speaks to the church in Pergamum. And as we unpack this letter we're going to see that for the church in Pergamum and for the church today, a world of many gods pressures the Church to worship Jesus-And, but Christ calls us to worship him alone.

I want to unpack that statement in three parts today. First, "A World of Many gods."

II. A World of Many "Gods"

One of the consistent things that's been standing out to me in our study from church to church so far has been the idolatrous options available to people in the cities of the Roman Empire and just how much participation in the worship of Caesar and temples to the local gods and goddesses were baked into civic life. And Pergamum was no different. In fact the text almost leads us to believe that the worship of false gods in Pergamum might have been even more intense than we've seen so far. In verse thirteen the text says twice that this is a city where Satan has huge influence: 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**."

Now, the text doesn't spell out exactly what Jesus is referring to, but we do know that it was a place where worship of many different deities existed. Pergamum held the first temple dedicated to emperor worship. It was also known for its devotion to Asclepius (the god of healing).² Interestingly, Asclepius was represented by a serpent. And in scripture we see Satan being connected to a serpent in Genesis, and in Revelation we see the devil being depicted as a great dragon, which is like a giant serpent. There was also a well known cone-shaped hill near the city that was the site of many different pagan temples, including a temple to Zues that was said to hold Zues's throne.³ So there are a few reasons why Jesus might be giving Pergamum this title as the place where Satan dwells.

You know, as we read the text and try to picture life in a city like Pergamum, filled with temples to other gods, it seems so different from our world today. But one of the traps we can fall into in reading this text today is the assumption that our world is so unrecognizably different from the world back then. We have this weird form of chronological snobbery⁴ that makes us believe that the issues we deal with today are brand new, that we've progressed past the challenges of the past, and that the cultures of yesterday have nothing to no point of relevance to the culture today. So we read Jesus' letter to the church situated in a city so idolatrous that Jesus calls it the place where Satan lives (v. 13) and we picture temples and and incense and sacrifices taking place, and assume that we would have to do some mental gymnastics to make this ancient letter applicable to us today. But the reality is, we may have left the pillared temples behind, but not the idols. Just like Pergamum, our world today is full of idols.

² D.H. Campbell

³ Beale

⁴ "...the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate of our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that count discredited." - C.S. Lewis

You say, well I don't see any golden statues that people are bowing down to around here. (Maybe the naked guy in downtown Brighton?) But no, that's not the kind of idol I'm talking about. Pastor Tim Keller is really helpful here. He wrote in a book called *Counterfeit Gods*, "What is an idol? It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, 'If I have that, then I'll feel my life has meaning, then I'll know I have value, then I'll feel significant and secure.' There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is worship."⁵

You see, human beings we were made to worship. And when Adam and Eve sinned against God and broke our relationship with him and fractured the universe with their sin, that didn't mean people stopped worshipping. It just means that we've exchanged worshipping our Creator for worship of created things. And worshipping created things, making them the thing that absorbs your heart and imagination and devotion, will always promise joy and life and lead to disappointment and death. You see the good things that God has made aren't meant to terminate on themselves. They aren't made to be ultimate. They're made to point to the goodness and glory of God. But when they terminate on themselves, they lose their glory and weight and leave us hollow and unsatisfied.

And the gospel that came to Pergamum and the gospel for us today is a proclamation of the reordering of things. Or maybe better stated, the right ordering of things. It's the good news that says, hey you're looking to Caesar for your security; you're offering incense at his altar to find peace - well come and know true security and peace in the One who holds the universe in his hands. You want to worship Asclepius so he'll heal you. Well come and find true, eternal healing in the Great Physician. Or for us today, you want to make money and power your ultimate purpose? No, let money and power be neutral tools, they will crumble under the weight of your worship. Come worship Jesus and place your use of money and power beneath his authority.

This was the message that came to Pergamum a city of gods and as the gospel began to take root in the city the world began to react and pressure began to build for the church there and it was a pressure to worship Jesus-And. This is the second part of that statement: (1)a world of many gods (2) pressures the Church to worship Jesus-And,

III. The Pressure on the Church to worship Jesus-And

We don't have a record of the planting of the Church in Pergamum, it wasn't a city where it's recorded that Paul visited or anything, but somehow when John writes the book of Revelation there is a body of believers there. And we can guess at how the gospel was presented based on the records we have of Paul's missionary work and how churches were planted in other cities throughout Asia Minor. We can assume that someone brought the gospel to the Pergamum and began to preach the good news of Jesus Christ as the one True God who died and rose again and offers eternal life in his kingdom. And that message began to take root, not only in the Jewish synagogue, but among the gentiles of the city. And because those who came to Christ all of a sudden changed their practices - all of a sudden

⁵ Tim Keller on pages xvii and xviii of [Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters](#)

they weren't coming to the feasts and the orgies in the temples, they weren't offering incense to Caesar, they're involvement in the economy changed, they began gathering with one another and caring for one another, and helping the outcasts and the poor and the untouchables of the city... we can guess that there was somehow a gospel disruption the city and it gained the disapproving attention of the pagan culture to the point that at least one man named Antipas was killed for holding fast to the name of Jesus. We don't know who Antipas was, but we know Jesus calls him a faithful witness which is a title that is reserved for Jesus himself in other parts of Revelation, so this brother must have been a hard core lover of Jesus... and he was murdered for refusing to leave the name of Jesus behind.

So the Church in Pergamum has endured persecution and Jesus sees them in their suffering and acknowledges it, but also Jesus has a stern correction for his people: "...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)

The Teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

So Jesus calls out the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans. And do you see how in the beginning of verse 15 it says "So also"? Well, it's likely that Jesus isn't referring to two different streams of false teaching, but instead he's attaching biblical symbolism to the false teaching that was contaminating the church. Balaam was a man you can read about in the book of Numbers who counseled Israel's enemies to literally seduce the people of Israel, so his name is kind of a biblical catchword for false teachers who sought to seduce God's people into unfaithfulness to God. This is similar to how we might say someone is a Judas and most people would understand that to mean they were a backstabbing, betrayer.

And the this is the second time the Nicolaitans have been brought up. Jesus also condemned them in the church in Ephesus. The teaching of the Nicolaitans that was being allowed to continue in the church wasn't a blatant false teaching against Christianity. It was probably a doctrine of compromise. A teaching that offered the church a way to worship Jesus AND participate in the local customs that would keep them from being ostracized and persecuted. Look at the end of verse 14, they hold to the teaching of Balaam, "...so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality." These were things that, when they came to Christ and withdrew from these practices, had marked them out from their culture and caused the world to hate them. And after they had endured suffering and persecution, holding fast to the name of Christ to the point of Antipas's martyrdom a teaching began to take root that gave them a way out from suffering. It was a doctrine of Jesus-And. You can say "Jesus is Lord," AND visit the temple to the emperor and say, "Caesar is Lord." You can celebrate the Lord's supper AND visit the temple and eat their ritual feast. You can be united to Jesus AND unite yourself with a temple prostitute.

This is something we need to see: Do you notice how false teaching arose at the point of the church's pain, where the world and the church seemed most at odds? At that point of pain there came an

opportunity for believers to rationalize their way into believing that they could keep Christ AND escape the hatred of the world.

Let me ask you a question: where are the points of friction between the world and God's church today? In what areas right now is the world most at odds with, most baffled by, most frustrated by the way of Jesus? In what ways is the world of many gods at odds with the one true God? I've got four ways that the God of the Bible the gods of the world come into friction with each other.

Power - The world of many gods says that if you feel afraid, vulnerable, oppressed, powerless, the answer is to scrape and scramble for power. Power gives us security. It gives us control. Allows us to save ourselves. It makes us the master of our own destiny, the captain of our own fate. It also sees the imbalance of power as the main problem in the world and the redistribution of power as the solution to the world's problems. In contrast, the way of Jesus says the problem in the world is sin in the hearts of people, which works itself out into evil uses of power. It teaches us to acknowledge our limited nature, to own our neediness, to look to another - to God who has all the power to save us. It teaches us that God sees and dwells with the lowly (Is 57:15) and that we should do the same (Rom 12:16). That the poor in spirit and the meek are blessed (Mt 5:3, 5). That the last will be first, and the first last (Mt 20:16). We worship One who set aside his power and and humbled himself to the point of death. We are called to pattern our lives after him. The world of many gods is baffled by a God who would tell us that surrender is better than power.

Sex - The world of many gods says that sex is no big deal. That our appetite for it should be satiated in whatever ways we crave for it to be satisfied. And at the same time it says that sex is a huge deal because our sexual engagement carries a huge weigh in defining our identities. Christianity, in a nutshell, teaches almost exactly the opposite: that our sexual desires don't define us, that instead we are definid by our union with Jesus, who is our ultimate spouse. And because we are united to Jesus who faithfully, sacrificiallylly perseus his bride the Church, we are to conform and limit our sexual appetite to the context of marriage between a man and a woman. The world of many gods rejects a people who would submit themselves to that kind of ethic.

Money - The world of many gods offers money to us as something to be master over. Money is a tool for gaining power, for making friends, for feeding our desires. Money gives us security and comfort. Money gives us status and respect. Therefore it's something to be accumulated and protected at all costs. Money is deeply personal and private. Jesus, on the other hand, warns against the sinful use of money more than he talks about sex. He tells his followers to reject greed and embrace radical generosity. He warns against money mastering us. He commands us to be careful and guard against greed because our existence isn't defined by the abundance of our possessions (Luke 12:15). The world of many Gods is scandalized by the sort of self sacrifice and dependance on God for security that Jesus commands around money.

Comfort - The world of many gods pressures us to worship the gods of power and sex and money so that we can enjoy a life free from the suffering of powerlessness or the suffering of self-denial, or the suffering of insecurity. They offer our comfort to us as an ultimate goal. But Jesus calls his people to

not be surprised when we are hated, to endure suffering faithfully, to sacrifice our comfort in the moment for the promise of eternal joy.

In each of these areas we will find points of friction between the way of Jesus and the world. They're areas of life where the world takes something that God has given to us good and offers it to us as a god, as something ultimate, alongside Christ. We've just seen, these two ways of seeing power, money, sex, comfort, they don't mix well and yet, in each area we don't have to look hard to find ways in which, like the Church in Pergamum, Christians today are tempted to worship the god of Jesus-And. Jesus and power. Jesus and sex. Jesus and money. Jesus and comfort. Jesus and human connection.

When the church worships the god of Jesus-And-Power, we see evil like what's been in the headlines recently, where men who are supposed to be leading whole denominations of Gods people become so preoccupied with their fear of losing power that they enable abusers and ignore victims and allow the name of Christ to be soiled by their inhumanity and callousness and abuse. When the church worships the god of Jesus-And-Power we see the worship of politics begin to grow. Tim Keller writes,

"One of the signs that an object is functioning as an idol is that fear becomes one of the chief characteristics of life. When we center our lives on the idol, we become dependent on it. If our counterfeit god is threatened in any way, our response is complete panic. We do not say, "What a shame, how difficult," but rather "This is the end! There's no hope!"

This may be a reason why so many people now respond to U.S. political trends in such an extreme way. When either party wins an election, a certain percentage of the losing side talks openly about leaving the country. They become agitated and fearful for the future. They have put the kind of hope in their political leaders and policies that once was reserved for God and the work of the gospel. When their political leaders are out of power, they experience a death. They believe that if their policies and people are not in power, everything will fall apart. ...The points of contention overshadow everything else, and a poisonous environment is created."⁶

This is a huge temptation in our context. This is something that is plaguing God's church and we need to repent and learn to hate this kind of idolatry.

When the church worships the god of Jesus-And-Money, we see followers of Jesus consumed with the getting, keeping, and growing of wealth. We see lives choked into immobility and self-indulgence by material possessions. We see a turning away from the poor and needy and a focus on building slicker, more impressive country clubs.

When the church worships the god of Jesus-And-Sex we see believers abandoning the sexual ethic the scriptures teach and the church has held for millenia in order to compromise with the standards of the rest of the world, celebrating things that go beyond God's design of sex between one man and

⁶ Tim Keller, Counterfeit Gods, pg 98

one woman in the context of marriage. We see believers making allowances for themselves to use other people by consuming pornographic material.

When the church worships the god of Jesus-And-Comfort, we see a church unable to engage meaningfully in evangelism because they are unable to imagine risk or discomfort or sacrifice for the sake of the gospel, instead we find a people squabbling over the ways that their preferences aren't met, the ways that they might be inconvenienced, the ways that they might be limited. We see people who have believed the lie that the goodness of God can only be experienced through the comforts of life, so we balk and fight and worry and fret that the comforts we experienced yesterday might not be guaranteed to us tomorrow.⁷

“[The church in Pergamum] participated in local society by attending pagan temples, eating food offered to idols, and committing sexual sin. They didn't stand out from the world, but rather compromised with it.”⁸ This is the false teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans that was being tolerated then and is still poisoning God's people today. What we don't understand when we embrace this teaching that we can harmonize Christianity with the values and ideologies of the world is that when we try to worship Jesus-And, we don't worship Jesus at all! We're worshipping a Jesus that is not the Christ of scripture. And Jesus is reminding us that that kind of idolatry, even though it whispers to us that we can have the best of both worlds - comfort today, and eternity with Christ - leads to God's judgment and God's wrath.

IV. The Call of Christ to Worship Him Alone

This is where we get to the third part of that statement: (1) a world of many gods (2) pressures the Church to worship Jesus-And, (3) but Christ calls us to worship him alone.

Remember, Jesus wrote to the church in Pergamum calling himself “him who has the sharp two-edged sword” (v13). Then in verse 16 he says “¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.” Jesus is not a soft spoken, feathered haired philosopher. Jesus is the holy, holy, holy judge. The only righteous judge over the peoples of the Earth. And his warning his people that if they allow this poison to continue in the church, he will come with violence. He will war on those who tolerate this false teaching.

Jesus Christ is the second person of the trinity. He is the supreme God of the universe. He is the only one who is worthy to be worshiped, the only one who is worthy of praise and he will not suffer for himself to be worshiped alongside anyone or anything else. He calls all people to worship him and him alone. And he is right to do this because in worshiping him we find life and worshiping anything other than him or alongside him leads to death. So his demand for our undivided worship is for our good and for his glory!

This is the promise he gives to “those who conquer,” to those who hear and obey his word: some of the “hidden manna” and a white stone with a new name written on it. Manna was the food that God provided for his people as they walked through the wilderness on their way to the promised land. It

⁷ Inspired by a [tweet](#) by Marwan Aboul-Zelof, @theurbanarab

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, ESV Commentary

was God providing for their need as they persevered. Remember the false teaching on Pergamum was a teaching that arose out of a sense of need - we're being persecuted, we need to avoid being killed, so let's worship Jesus-And... and Jesus is promising to meet us in our vulnerability and insecurity. He is promising to provide for our need.

A white stone, in that time, was a prize given to those who won the games. It was a token that bought the winners an entrance into the victory feast. Jesus is promising that for those who persevere, for those who remain faithful and refrain from the feasts in the temple of the false gods, he will give entrance into the true and better feast - the marriage supper of the lamb.

V. Conclusion

There wasn't time today to cast a line deeper into the book of revelation to tie the themes here to specific texts that come later. But I would just say that these themes of faithfulness to Jesus, resisting the temptation of idolatry come again and again like a beating drum throughout the book. And the prize for those who persevere is always the same - the true and better feast in the new heavens and the new earth, right with God, resting in him forever.

Jesus who warns the judgment of the sword of his mouth is a warrior who fight to protect and champion his people. In a world of many gods that pressures you to worship the false god of Jesus-And, put your trust in Christ alone. Idols make promises they cannot keep, but for those who have ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, Jesus promises the nourishment and joy of the heavenly feast. He sees you. He loves you. He is contending for your undivided worship for his glory and your good.