

Rev. Kyewoon Choi, "The Church in Pergamum," ManahawkinMethodist.org, August 11, 2024

The Church in Pergamum--the compromising church  
(Subtitle: A call not to compromise)

Revelation 2:12-17 (NASB)

<sup>12</sup> "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has **the sharp, double-edged sword**. <sup>13</sup> I know where you live—where **Satan has his throne**. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where **Satan lives**.

<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I have **a few things against you**: There are some among you who hold to **the teaching of Balaam**, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate **food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality**. <sup>15</sup> Likewise, you also have those who hold to **the teaching of the Nicolaitans**. <sup>16</sup> **Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth**.

<sup>17</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person **a white stone with a new name written on it**, known only to the one who receives it.

## Introduction

### A recap of the past two Sundays:

We are going through our sermon series on Jesus' letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. So far, we have covered two congregations: the Church in Ephesus and Smyrna. We have learned the importance of defending the biblical truth and the repentance in the Church. We also learned that those who are faithful to the Lord until death will never taste the second death, which is the eternal fire, a.k.a. hell.

This morning, we are going to listen to the Lord who wrote a letter to the Church in Pergamum. Let's begin with the background info on this city.

### Background info:

Pergamum is also called Pergamos or Pergamon. "The word Pergamum means 'marriage' or 'the elevation.'" <sup>1</sup> The city was located about 40 miles north of Smyrna. "By the first century AD there were three large temples located there in the city for worshipping the emperor and the first temple was built there in 29 BC. The city was also known for the huge altar to the false God Zeus, which is perhaps what is referred to by Satan's throne in the letter to the church." <sup>2</sup>

*"Pergamum was a city given over to the worship of many Greek Idols. There was so much idolatry and different religions that in order for Rome to successfully rule they demanded the cooperation of all groups."<sup>3</sup>*

Keep this in mind as we continue.

## Content

Once again, we will go over the text verse by verse. Christ says in verse 12,

v. 12: *"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has **the sharp, double-edged sword**.*

Pay attention here how Jesus introduces Himself to the Church in Pergamum. *"I have the sharp, double-edged sword,"* He declares. He gives a hint what He is going to address in His letter: fighting false teachings in the Church with God's Word and His truth. Here, Christ means God's Word and His truth by 'sword.' Here's one example. As Paul the Apostle talks about divine panoply in spiritual warfare, he writes: *"And take the helmet of salvation and the **sword** of the Spirit, which is **the word of God**"* (Ephesians 6:17). Hebrews 4:12-13 also says about the Word of God as this: *"<sup>12</sup>For **the word of God** is alive and active. **Sharper than any double-edged sword**, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. <sup>13</sup>Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."* Christ also used the same Word of God to ward off the devil's temptation (Matthew 4). So should we. No Christian will win the spiritual battle without the Word of God. The devil is most afraid of the sharp, double-edged sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.

v. 13: *I know where you live—where **Satan has his throne**. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where **Satan lives**.*

Wherever idol worship is prevalent, that's where Satan lives. The huge altar to Zeus in Pergamum is referred to by Satan's throne here. Indeed, Satan dwelt in Pergamum, because the city was a temple emporium, full of idols and worshipers thereof. For instance, they worshiped many Greek idols such as Zeus (Ζεύς) (god of power), Dionysus (Διονυσός) (god of wine-making, pleasure, human sacrifice, also known as Bacchus), Demeter (Δημήτηρ, goddess of harvest and agriculture), Asclepius (Ἀσκληπιός) (god of medicine with snakes) and even Trajan (Roman emperor, 98-117 AD). An interesting story that depicts what was really going on in one of the temples called "Asclepieia" in those days.

**Asclepius:** *"From the fifth century BC onwards, the cult of Asclepius grew very popular and pilgrims flocked to his healing temples (Asclepieia) to be cured of their ills. Ritual purification would be followed by offerings or sacrifices to the god (according to means), and*

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*the supplicant would then spend the night in the holiest part of the sanctuary— the abaton (or adyton). Any dreams or visions would be reported to a priest who would prescribe the appropriate therapy by a process of interpretation. Some healing temples also used sacred dogs to lick the wounds of sick petitioners. In honor of Asclepius, a particular type of non-venomous snake was often used in healing rituals, and these snakes— the Aesculapian Snakes— slithered around freely on the floor in dormitories where the sick and injured slept. These snakes were introduced at the founding of each new temple of Asclepius throughout the classical world.”<sup>4</sup> Some scholars believe the symbol of medicine originated from the rod of Asclepius with two snakes winding around.<sup>5</sup>*

Satan persecuted Christians in Pergamum. Holding onto their confession of Jesus Christ, some became martyrs. One of them was Antipas.

**Antipas:** Not known much in the Bible. However, “According to Christian tradition, John the Apostle ordained Antipas as bishop of Pergamon during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero. The traditional accounts say Antipas was martyred during the reign of Nero (54-68) or Domitian, by burning in a **brazen bull-shaped altar** for casting out demons worshipped by the local population.”<sup>6</sup>

“The **brazen bull**, also known as the **bronze bull**, was a torture and execution device designed in ancient Greece. The bull was said to have been hollow, and made entirely of bronze, with a door in one side. Allegedly, the condemned were locked inside the device (with their head aligned within the bull's head), and a fire was set beneath it, heating the metal to the extent that the person within slowly roasted to death.”<sup>7</sup>

Christ continues in verses 14 and 15.

v. 14-15: <sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I have **a few things against you**: There are some among you who hold to **the teaching of Balaam**, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate **food sacrificed to idols and** committed **sexual immorality**. <sup>15</sup> Likewise, you also have those who hold to **the teaching of the Nicolaitans**.

Christ has a few things against the Church in Pergamum. One, holding to the teaching of Balaam. The other, holding onto the teaching of the Nicolaitans. These teachings allowed the believers to mingle with idol worshipers, eat with them food sacrificed to idols, to commit sexual immorality, and even polygamy.

### **The Teaching of Balaam:**

*Balaam: “was a biblical character, a non-Israelite prophet and diviner who lived in Pethor, a region now southeastern Turkey”<sup>8</sup> As the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land, King Balak of Moab hired Balaam to curse Israel, but the LORD turned his curse into a blessing (Deuteronomy 23:3–6).*

Because of Balaam's repeated attempts to curse Israelites, the Israelites later committed infidelity with the daughters of Moab. It is well written in Number 25:1 ff. As you listen, please pay attention to the phrase "**eat, bow down to their gods, become followers of Baal.**"

*"While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to commit infidelity with the daughters of Moab. <sup>2</sup> For they **invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.** <sup>3</sup> So Israel became followers of Baal of Peor, and the Lord was angry with Israel"* (Numbers 25:1-3).

As far as **eating food sacrificed to idols** in the Pergamum Church, one group says, no way. *Nothing unclean will enter my mouth.* Especially, the food that was sacrificed to idols. We will never participate in idol worship by eating the food sacrificed to idols, they declared.

They were following Paul's teaching on eating the sacrifices. *"<sup>18</sup> Look at the people of Israel; are **those who eat the sacrifices not partners in the altar?** <sup>19</sup> What do I mean then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? <sup>20</sup> No, but I say that things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they **sacrifice to demons** and not to God; and **I do not want you to become partners with demons**"* (1 Corinthians 10:18-20).

Other folks in the Church disagreed. They said it is OK. Idol is nothing after all, and there is only one true God. Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude, they argued: *"<sup>5</sup> for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer"* (1 Timothy 4:5). So, as long as we pray over the food before we eat, they say, it will cleanse even the food sacrificed to idols, and we can eat it.

Such tension was common among the churches besides Pergamum. For instance, consider the Corinthian Church hundreds of miles away. To them, Paul instructed that even though we can eat the food that was cleansed by prayer, we'd better not eat any meat at all for the sake of believers with weak faith. Let me read to you his letter to the Corinthian believers.

*"<sup>4</sup> Therefore, concerning the eating of food sacrificed to idols, we know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one. ...<sup>7</sup> However, not all people have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. <sup>8</sup> Now food will not bring us close to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.*

*<sup>9</sup> But take care that this freedom of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> For if someone sees you, the one who has knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will his conscience, if he is weak, not be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? (kc-it is like you see Pastor Choi dining in an idol's temple and eating food there, you will think that it is alright for you to do the same). <sup>11</sup> For through your knowledge the one who is weak is ruined, the brother or sister for whose sake Christ died. <sup>12</sup> And so, by sinning against the*

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brothers and sisters and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, **I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to sin**" (1 Corinthians 8:4-13). Paul concludes,

*"<sup>21</sup> It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother or sister stumbles,"* (Romans 14:20-23).

Jesus' position on eating the food sacrificed to idols is very clear: do not eat it. Do not partake in their idol worship.

Another thing mentioned here is **sexual immorality**.

All I can say is that the lax sexual practice in Roman world in the first century also affected the Church members in Pergamum. For instance, back then, *"Legally, a Roman husband did not commit adultery when he had sex outside marriage as long as his partner was considered sexually available; sexual misconduct was adultery depending on the status of a female partner... as long as you hold off from brides, single women, maidens, the youth and free boys, love whatever you want...Prostitution was legal throughout the Roman Empire in all periods."*<sup>9</sup>

Again, it is not clear how prevalent such lax practice was among the believers in Pergamum church. However, here's one glimpse of those practices affected the Church in the first century. Paul once again wrote to the believers in the Corinthian Church,

*"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and sexual immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, namely, that someone has his father's wife. <sup>2</sup> You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst"* (1 Corinthians 5:1-2).

As far as **the Nicolaitans heresy**, it is polygamy. One story says that Nicolaus wanted to keep himself sexually pure so that he offered his beautiful wife to the men in congregation to marry. *"Thomas Aquinas believed that Nicolas supported either polygamy or the holding of wives in common."*<sup>10</sup>

Christ clearly warns against such sexual immorality in the Church. Thank God, once Christianity became the state religion in Rome in the fourth century AD, sexual morality was well established in the Church as well as in society.

**v. 16: Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.**

Get this. Christ will fight against those who don't repent from idol worship and sexual immoral behaviors with the sword of His mouth—the Word of God.

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v. 17: *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person **a white stone with a new name written on it**, known only to the one who receives it.*

The white stone, one commentary says, is "possibly a brilliant diamond."<sup>11</sup> However, "the real value of the stone rests in the new name of the recipient which is his title to eternal glory."<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

The lesson I got from the Church in Pergamum is this: Satan works and thrives among the idol worshipers in the world. Beware also of Satan's strategy to destroy the Church of God. He uses such weapons against Christians as follows: 1. False doctrine/teaching (denial of virgin birth and resurrection, conformity to the world). 2. Sexual immorality (polygamy and pornography) 3. Persecution 4. Idolatry (money worship).

Christ commands: Fight the good fight with the Word of God. Those who keep themselves pure and strong in the time of compromise will receive a white stone with a new name written on it. Only they, nobody else, know what's written on the stone. May God give each one of us that white stone. Amen.

### End Notes:

1. <https://folcc.org/the-church-at-pergamum-understanding-the-indulged-church-age-errors/>.
2. [https://thebiblestudy.co.uk/study/the-letter-to-the-church-at-pergamum/#google\\_vignette](https://thebiblestudy.co.uk/study/the-letter-to-the-church-at-pergamum/#google_vignette)
3. <https://folcc.org/the-church-at-pergamum-understanding-the-indulged-church-age-errors/>.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asclepius>.
5. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caduceus>.
6. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antipas\\_of\\_Pergamum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antipas_of_Pergamum).
7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazen\\_bull](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brazen_bull).
8. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balaam>.
9. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexuality\\_in\\_ancient\\_Rome](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexuality_in_ancient_Rome).
10. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolaiism>.
11. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1966), 70.
12. *Ibid.*, 71.