

Pergamum: The Church That Would not Obey Revelation 2:12-17

In the 1993 NCAA Division II Cross Country championships there were 128 runners. The 6.2 mile run had been marked out by course officials. The starting gun sounded and the runners began their trek along the course. Toward the end of the race one of the runners realized something was wrong. He saw that the main pack had missed the turn. Those ahead of him were taking a shortcut.

In an interview after the race he told how he had frantically attempted to warn the other runners. He was right and only four other runners followed him. The rest continued taking a shortcut, which allowed them to run a shorter distance and finish the race sooner. In a widely criticized decision, race officials allowed the abbreviated route to stand as the “official course” and Delcavo officially finished 123rd.

I’m troubled because the church today is much like that race. It has taken shortcuts, taken its eye off the real course. Many a church has come to believe that they will be rewarded even for going off course. They think they are following God’s path but have deviated from it. One of these days Christ the impartial judge will return and bring judgment on the church, maybe He already has.

We are considering the messages Christ gave to seven churches in Asia Minor at the end of the first century, some 60 years after His ascension. Each letter had significance to something the church was going through at that particular time relevant to them and in most cases a warning to restore their relationship with Him. Throughout church history we have seen periods of time that correlate in some way to each church message. We can see represented in some way in today’s church the characteristics being cited by the Lord as He writes.

Even though we have more churches to study I am

most troubled because of what I see and read about today’s modern church in America. I see the trend of churches becoming like Pergamum. It is becoming more and more prevalent.

Please open your Bibles to **Revelation 2:12-17**.

Let’s consider these points as we talk about Pergamum – The Church that would not obey:

The culture of the city

The character of Christ

The conduct of the Church

The conquering Christian

I. THE CULTURE OF THE CITY – v. 1a

Let’s first talk about the wonders of Pergamum.

A. The Wonders of Pergamum

Following up the coast of modern Turkey we come to the ancient city of Pergamum. The city was about 70 miles to the north of Smyrna and about 20 inland. It had a university and was the seat of learning with a library second only to the library of Alexandria, Egypt boasting 200,000 volumes. Mark Antony gave the library to Cleopatra as a gift and all its volumes were shipped to Egypt. It was here that they discovered the art of making parchment which was called pergamena after the city.

Even though no major trade routes by land or sea passed through the city, it was considered to be the greatest city in Asia Minor. At the time of this letter it had been the capital of Asia Minor for 250 years. Because of its very tropical climate, it was in Roman writer Pliny called it by far the most distinguished city of Asia. Situated atop a hill 1,000 feet above the plain archeologist Sir William Ramsey said its very appearance gave the traveler the impression of a royal city. It was considered the defender of Greek culture in all Asia Minor. With its many wonders the city was both wealthy and wicked.

B. The Wickedness of Pergamum

Ephesus was the political center of Asia Minor. Smyrna was the commercial center of Asia Minor. Pergamum was the religious center of Asia Minor. The city held a very temporal, secular view of life. It was concerned about attaining the pleasures of life – eat, drink and be merry. Life doesn't get any better than this.

As the religious center, it promoted the imperial worship of Caesar. There was a temple built to honor Caesar Augustus. Daily you could hear the chants of kurios kaiser or Caesar is lord.

The city boasted a multitude of temples to foreign gods. Unger's Bible Dictionary notes that the city was greatly addicted to idolatry. Its groves were filled with idols and statues to various gods.

As you entered the city, on your right was a temple to Athena, the goddess of wisdom. There was a great temple built to Zeus who was considered the greatest of the gods. Then there was a temple to Dionysius who was the god of wine or pleasure. There was also a temple built to Asclepius, the god of healing or medicine. It would have been the Mayo clinic of the day. Many people from the known world came to this temple to be healed. They used both medicine and psychology to heal. Beneath the temple there were a series of tunnels that were used for medicinal purposes. On the ceiling of the tunnels were holes that looked like ventilation shafts, but were actually a type of speaker system. As the person walked through the tunnel a beautiful, soothing voice would be speaking things like "you will get well, you are already starting to feel better, you will be healed." The temple had parlors for hot baths and therapeutic massage. There was a theater in the temple where plays about healing would be acted out. People from all over the Roman world came to be healed.

The symbol of Asclepius was a serpent. It is where modern medicine has gotten its symbol of a serpent on a pole. Many came to the temple to sleep on the

floor to allow non-poisonous snakes to crawl over them because it was believed that if they touched you they would bring healing.

Their idolatry was very sensuous worship with cultic orgies. They worshipped nature, science and medicine. **Does that sound familiar in our culture?**

As a city and center of religious life, it took on the same intolerance toward Christianity that the other surrounding regions had for believers. There was great persecution in Pergamum as well because Christians wouldn't embrace polytheism.

That is a brief overview of the culture of the city. Now let's consider the character of Christ.

II. THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST – v. 1b

In some specific way Christ reveals Himself to each Church. To the Church in Pergamum He reveals Himself as the One **"who has the sharp, double-edged sword."**

This is significant for this church because later on He states that if they don't repent He **"will soon come and fight against them with the sword My mouth."**

The sword was very significant to Rome. It was a symbol of authority, power and judgment. The sword swept through the surrounding regions capturing and making many other regions subservient to them. If they stepped out of line, judgment was brought swiftly to bear. It was a way of ensuring that other uprisings would not be tolerated and kept regions in check. There was no tolerance for insubordination. People were brought to fear the sword of Rome.

Jesus wanted to remind them that His is the sword of ultimate authority, His is the sword of ultimate power, His is the sword of ultimate judgment.

The sword represents God's Word. **One author noted it has the "twofold ability to separate believers from the world and to condemn the world for its sin. It is both the sword of salvation and sword of death."**

Hebrews 4:12 "For the Word of God is living 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. 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."

The One who knows all and who sees all is the One by whose Word, His written Word we will be judged. His Word will accomplish its intended purpose. For those who read it and obey it, for those who read, understand and believe, it reveals how we can have a personal relationship with God through faith in His Son, its words bring life. But for those who refuse it and ignore it, His words will be the sword that brings judgment. It is more important to fear His sword than any sword of man.

The sword of His Word will cut loose the chains of sin for those who repent or they will condemn those who refuse it. The sword of His Word brings life or death. His Word exposes and judges. He is both the judge and executioner. **"Out of His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations." Revelation 19:15**

Christ has the ability to look at us and into us and judge us by His powerful Word, the Word that has final authority. His Word justifies, His Word judges. That is His character revealed to Pergamum.

III. THE CONDUCT OF THE CHURCH – v. 13-16

A. The Courage of This Church – v. 13

As with all the churches, Christ knows what they are going through. He knows all about them.

Notice what He knows about this church. He first states that He knows where they live and it's not in a very good neighborhood. If you have ever gone out house hunting and talked with a realtor, right away you want to know about the neighborhood. Is it going to be a safe place to raise a family? What's the crime rate? Where are the shopping malls and grocery stores? How are the schools? If you are moving to a new town you also might ask about churches.

Christ says He knows where they live. He says it is the very throne of Satan. **What does He mean?** The Bible tells us that Satan is the prince of the power of the air. He roams around wreaking havoc on places trying to keep people from following Christ. As we noted a few minutes ago, this city was filled with sensual, idolatrous worship. Anything and everything was worshipped and you had to give your allegiance to Caesar if you wanted to buy or sell in the marketplace. It was a place of great Satanic influence. He had control of the city with its prolific idolatry.

These Christians were living in a very difficult place morally and spiritually. Maybe you can identify with them. Maybe you work in a very difficult work environment because no one else is a Christian. The talk is vulgar and the conduct is lewd. You feel isolated and alone from everything that is moral and spiritual.

Maybe that's how you feel at school. Even some of the kids who say they are Christian don't act any different from the non-Christians.

Maybe that's your neighborhood. It might even be your home.

When we look around it's increasingly evident that our own culture, a country built on the principles of God's Word is becoming very much the throne of Satan. What's right is wrong and what's wrong is now right. It's even permeated the church.

I read an article last week about a demonstration on the steps of the capital in Texas where pro-abortionists were shouting “Hail Satan.”

Jesus told them that He knew the difficult place they lived. As a matter of fact, as we read on we note that persecution had already begun. Christ not only knew it was difficult, but He also knew that many of them had remained faithful in spite of persecution. One of their own, Antipas, had been martyred. We know nothing about him. Not even Foxe’s Book of Martyrs lists him, but God’s Holy Word does. Christ knew about his suffering for the name of Christ. He knew that these believers had remained faithful to Him and that’s all that matters. They had tremendous courage.

Yet, though it was a church of courage, Christ has something against them. Christ not only reveals their courage, He reveals its compromise.

B. The Compromise of This Church – v. 14-15

The word compromise means a settlement in which each side gives up some demands or makes concessions. In some way they yield. Some people might say that when two people or groups compromise that both lose. I believe that when there is compromise, the group that has the most to lose ends up being the only loser. Typically it is the one who wants to hold on to what is right or true.

Consider carefully how the church in Pergamum compromised. Some of their church members began to follow the teaching or doctrine of Balaam.

Why is Balaam significant?

We have to go back to the Old Testament book of Numbers to understand what the church of Pergamum had begun to embrace. In Numbers 22 Israel was traveling through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Balak was the king of the Moabites who was fearful of Israel. He found a prophet of God by the name of Balaam. The

problem with Balaam was that he sold his services. This was a prophet for a profit. Balak wanted Balaam to curse Israel so that the nation of Israel would become insignificant. Balaam turned the curses into blessings. Balak continued to pester him to the point that Balaam told Balak how to defeat the Israelites.

In **Numbers 31:15-16** Moses asked the army commanders why they had allowed all the women of Moab to live. He then makes this clear statement as to why they should die: **“they were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord.”**

How did they turn the heart of the Israelites away from the Lord? Here’s the advice Balaam gave to Balak and the practice in Pergamum. If Balak got the Moabite women to marry the Israelite men, they would be enticed to join in idolatrous practices. When that happened, the nation would become insignificant. Consequently God sent a plague that killed 24,000 Israelites, because they compromised following God and began to worship idols.

Some of the people in the church of Pergamum had begun to practice some of the idolatrous worship of the city. They believed that doing both was ok. They knew that meat was offered to idols and they still bought and ate it. Some offered a pinch of incense in the market so they could buy and sell. Some were engaging in the sensual and immoral practices of the pagan religions.

If you study Latin American history you find that when the Jesuits came to America and attempted to convert the indigenous groups, they found that the Indians wouldn’t abandon their pagan worship so they incorporated it into Catholicism – the two were blended. “If you can’t beat them, join them.”

That’s the problem I see in America today. That’s the problem I see in the church today. Many

churches are abandoning following after God allowing worldly, dare I say, idolatrous practices into the church. If you want to win the lost, become like them. Like Israel, the church is losing its significance, it's losing its identity, it's losing its influence.

I want to read an excerpt from a book I began reading this week. The title of the book is *The Harbinger* and while it is written as a fictional novel and I don't necessarily agree with all that is in the book, I don't want you to miss the point that what happened to Israel under Balaam when they compromised, is happening in America and more sadly is happening in the Church in America.
The Harbinger - pgs. 16-17

The problem in the Pergamum church was that those who had stood true the faith in the midst of opposition that persecuted the faithful was the same group of people who were tolerating this slow erosion of morality and sound Biblical doctrine to infiltrate the church. It was becoming worldly, accepting the practice of the doctrine of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. They were claiming that it was ok to practice some of the lifestyle of the culture and be a Christian at the same time.

Does that sound familiar? Hey, as long as it doesn't hurt anybody what's the harm? If you want to make it in this city you have to go along with them, join in or you won't be accepted. If you don't, you might get fed to the lions or lose about 10 inches in height when your head and shoulders are separated. You may be asked to compromise at work to get a promotion or keep your job. It may be expected to compromise at school to get a better grade or to make the team.

Doctrinal erosion can happen so subtly and it can begin with such benign things. I suggest that it begins in the home when individuals compromise and sooner or later it enters the church. We lose our priorities and then we lose our purpose.

I want to read another excerpt from Chuck Swindoll's book *The Church Awakening*.
The Church Awakening – pgs. 28-29

The Church in Corinth, like Israel in the Old Testament and like Pergamum, faced the same thing. They allowed immorality to sweep in the church without any consequences. Paul told them to deal with it or he would deal with it when he came to visit.

The church cannot tolerate sin, because when sin is tolerated doctrine stability begins to teeter. Yet the church has allowed it to creep in to the point of compromise and even embrace what it once stood in opposition against.

John's advice in his first epistle (**1 John 2:15-16**) is that we should not love the world or the things that are in the world, because if we do, God's love isn't in us. **Does that mean that we should renounce any technology and become Amish in nature? Does that mean that we no longer drive cars or use the highway system or shop at stores or save money in banks – aren't those part of the world system?** You know that's not what I'm saying. The world system isn't shopping centers or transportation systems. The world system is anything that is immoral and unbiblical. It is our willingness to embrace and engage in the same practices Scripture condemns.

Paul's advice to the church of Rome (**Romans 12:1-2**) was not to conform any longer to the pattern of the world, don't accept any of its practices. Then he advises on how we keep from conforming to the world. He says we need to renew our mind. Let the Word of God continue to have a dominant and prevalent part in your lives. Never deviate from it. That's why Christ tells them that He is the One who has the sharp, two-edged Sword.

Paul's advice to Corinth was not to be unequally yoked. He wasn't talking only about marriage but much broader that as Christians we cannot engage

in worldly practices and be godly in character at the same time. Jesus said we cannot serve two masters.

In **Psalm 1:1-3** the Psalmist reminds us that when we have the Word of God firmly entrenched in our mind and heart we will be like a tree firmly planted and rooted by the river. When our heart and mind are renewed by God's Word then we will not be persuaded or seduced by the influence of the ungodly to participate in their idolatrous practices.

In His high priestly prayer in **John 17** Jesus prayed that we might be in the world but not of the world. He was praying for us that we might retain godly character while rubbing shoulders in a very anti-godly world, a world that is idolatrous and immoral.

But you say, Pastor, we don't have any carved wooden or stone statues of idols in our home. Idols don't have to be crafted from the images of pagan deities. Idols can be anything that we worship or hold greater than God. Our idols can be what we drive, it can be our work, it can be our family or hobby or home. It can be our reputation or image. Any time we say no to a command of God, we are allowing compromise in our life. Anything that has a greater priority in our life than God is an idol. The One who sees our actions and knows our heart will be the final judge of whether or not we have taken to the doctrine of Balaam or the Nicolaitans. Compromise happens so subtly.

One of the saddest verses to me is when Paul closes out his letter to Timothy and says that Demas had left him, because he loved this present world. He had been a faithful servant, a stalwart of the faith, but worldliness crept in and he abandoned Paul. Worse yet, He abandoned Christ.

This church had courage, but some in the church had compromised their faith in Christ by allowing worldliness to enter into their lives and then into the life of the church. But the Lord gives them a challenge.

C. The Challenge to This Church – v. 16a

How do they turn things around? How do they become the church wants them to be? How do they become the church He approves?

There is one simple word – **“Repent.”** The tense of the word gives it a sense of urgency – don't wait, do it now before it's too late.

I John 1:9 tells us that if we repent we have the assurance of being forgiven.

Repentance is a change of mind that results in a change of behavior. It's a matter of choice.

If they were to be accepted by God, they were to repent. This is a call for us to evaluate where we stand with Christ and determine if we have allowed any worldly practices to become the pattern of our life or church. If so, the call is for us to repent. If we don't this verse tells us the result of that choice.

D. There is Condemnation on the Church – v. 16b

“Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.”

This is not a final judgment, but it is a swift judgment. Christ won't tolerate the compromise of purity of doctrine or morality. He is saying that the One we think we are serving and living for will be the One who actually will fight against us and He will use His Word to do so. Unlike Ephesus who was told if they didn't repent He would remove their witness, Christ is saying if this church didn't repent of its tolerance and compromise, He would bring judgment against it.

Pastor Paul Chappell writes “many people think that they can enjoy sin and then find some means of avoiding the consequences. As one old preacher said, ‘they sow wild oats and then pray for crop

failure.’ But no matter what devices we come up with, God is a sure and certain judge. We cannot bargain with or bribe Him. His hatred of sin parallels His perfect holiness. He does not turn away from sin.

Throughout the New Testament we are reminded multiple times to be on guard. Be on guard so that moral and spiritual erosion does not occur and we begin to compromise. Repent or Christ will bring judgment by His faithful and accurate Word.

There is one final thought in this passage that is found in **verse 17**. It is the result of one who overcomes.

IV. THE CONQUERING CHRISTIAN – v. 17

The overcomer is given hidden manna and a white stone. Manna was that mystery food given by God in the wilderness to the Israelites. Every day they received their portion for the day. It was sufficient for the day. They never had too much and they never had too little.

Jesus is for us the manna, the bread of life. He is just what we need for eternal life.

John 6:32-35 “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘from now on give us this bread.’ Then Jesus declared, ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me will never go hungry, and he who believes in Me will never be thirsty.’”

To enter in the Promised Land of heaven you can only enter by having taken of the Bread of Life, by repenting of sin and trusting Christ as your Savior.

Christ then says you will be given a white stone and on it a new name that only you will know.

In Roman days a white stone had a couple of purposes. The first would be that if you were taken to court and acquitted of a crime your name was written on a white stone and given to you. You carried it with you and whenever there was question about your innocence you could produce that white stone. It was proof your trespasses were forgiven.

A white stone was also used when someone was hosting a party. If you were invited your name was inscribed on that stone as your invitation to enter as a guest. You would present it and be welcomed in to the party.

A great feast is being prepared and only those who have been invited will be allowed to enter, only those who have been acquitted of their sin through the shed blood of Christ will be allowed to dine. It is only through partaking of the hidden manna and our name inscribed on the white stone that we will be accepted into the presence of God.

The church in Pergamum had courageously withstood persecution, yet they had tolerated compromise within the body. **Is that a picture of us today? Have we tolerated idolatry and immorality? Have we lacked the courage to deal with it?** If so, know that the all-seeing Judge stands against us and will bring judgment if we do not repent. Compromise will always bring God’s judgment. Repent. Heed the warning to make sure you are an overcomer by having taken the bread of life, the only way to have eternal life.