

A Letter to Pergamum: Seduction

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[0 : 00] Good afternoon, everybody. This time of year, I'm always so thankful when the light is just streaming in the windows. It just transforms this space.

If you're just joining us for the first time, welcome. I'm Tommy. I'm one of the pastors at Church of the Advent. And for the last couple of weeks, we've been looking together at this amazing book in the Bible.

It's the last book in the Bible, the book called Revelation, the Revelation of St. John. And it's fascinating. It is confusing. It is at times intimidating.

There's a lot going on. It's hard to make sense of it. But we've been looking at this letter because it's incredibly relevant for us as the church. Because this letter is all about, this book is all about the role of the church in God's plan to renew the world.

Or we might put it this way. If the Gospels tell us about the death and resurrection of Jesus, then Revelation tells us about the death and resurrection of the church.

[1 : 02] The book of Revelation tells us about the great wedding at the end of all time where the church is joined to the bridegroom of Christ. It's a grand and marvelous book.

And so we've been looking together at it, asking this question. Who are we called to be as God's church in the world? There are so many different kinds of churches. What does Jesus want from us?

What does Jesus call us to focus on as His bride, as His people? And so we've been asking that question. This week we're going to be looking at Revelation chapter 2, verses 12 to 17.

The first couple of chapters of Revelation contain seven letters that Jesus writes to His church, to His bride. These are letters of preparation for all that is to come.

And the letter to Pergamum is particularly relevant to us because Pergamum was, in many ways, like the Washington, D.C. of Asia. And so we're going to look more closely at this.

[2 : 02] And Jesus tells us two things in this letter. First of all, He tells us about a two-pronged attack that we as the church need to be on guard against, a two-pronged attack.

And then the second thing He shows us is He gives us a two-part promise, hope to sustain us through all that is to come. So let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and it would be such a temptation to take Your Word and to put it on a dissection table and to dissect it and to parse it out and to cut it apart and to evaluate it.

But Lord, we need most desperately to sit under Your Word, to be on the table. And we need Your Word to dissect us and to open up and expose those deep places where we most need Your love and Your grace.

And so, Lord, we pray that that's what would happen tonight and that through that we might see Your Son, Jesus Christ, the living Word, face to face. And it's in His name that we pray. Amen. Amen. So first of all, Jesus, in this letter to the church at Pergamum, warns them and us.

- [3 : 20] These are open letters. They're meant for all the churches. He warns us about a two-pronged attack that we need to be on guard against. The church faces two threats.
- One is external and one is internal. The first that we see is the threat of persecution, overt persecution. So I'll read from verse 13. Jesus says, I know where you dwell, speaking to His people in Pergamum, where Satan's throne is.
- Yet you hold fast to 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. So Jesus is describing Pergamum as the place where Satan dwells, where His throne is.
- Now, that's pretty strong language. And it makes a little more sense when you understand that Pergamum was the seat of Roman power in Asia. This was the place of Roman authority, the center of Roman authority in Asia.
- And along with that, Pergamum was also the center of the imperial cult. So these are people who worshipped their political leaders as gods.
- [4 : 29] They worshipped the emperor as a divine being. And so that's what defines this culture in Pergamum, the worship of political power.
- And so it makes sense if you think about that kind of culture, men and women who are worshipping their political leaders, it makes sense that Christians would not be very welcome in a place like that.
- Because anywhere you find a Christian community, anywhere a Christian community dwells, they are inherently subversive to the political powers.
- They're inherently subversive. Because Christians submit to their political leaders because they are called to, they're commanded to, and so they submit. But their true allegiance remains with a higher king.
- And they know that for now they submit. And yet they also know that even as they submit, they know that one day that regime will come to its end. Its days are numbered.
- [5 : 31] And so Christians are seen as a threat to political leaders, especially totalitarian leaders. Christians are subversive. Subversive. And so they are persecuted.
- And here we see that the persecution has gotten quite fierce, and one person has actually been violently killed as a result of this antipathy. And so Jesus says, you're facing persecution, and yet he commends them.
- He says, you're holding fast to the faith. You're staying faithful even in the midst of overt persecution. So he's encouraging them. So that's the external threat, persecution.
- But what really concerns Jesus, and the focus of this letter, is the other attack, the internal threat, the second prong of attack which we might call seduction, or spiritual seduction.
- Verse 14, he says, 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.
- [6 : 36] Now he's referring back to a specific time in Israel's history. And as a matter of fact, these seven letters written to the seven churches in Asia, each letter actually corresponds to a period of time in Israel's history, beginning with creation and going all the way through the intertestamental period.
- It's pretty fascinating, actually, when you realize that these letters are a recapitulation of Israel's story. That's something we'll get into down the road, but just a little preview of what's to come in Revelation.
- But for now, I want to focus on the fact that he's referring back to a specific time in Israel's past. This is the time where they were wandering in the wilderness. They had been in the wilderness for almost 40 years at this point, and they had had a series of great military victories in Canaan.

And so the king of Moab is named Balak, and he sees what's happening with Israel, and he's afraid, and I think rightfully afraid, that the Israelites are going to come for him next. And he realizes that he needs to do something because it doesn't look like he's going to be able to defeat them if they decide to attack.

And so he sends word to a man named Balaam. And Balaam is a pagan prophet. And Balak sends word to Balaam and says, Hey, I'm going to pay you a bunch of money if you come where I am, and I want you to curse my enemies.

[7 : 53] I want you to curse Israel and weaken them so they're no longer a threat to me and I can defeat them. And this is a fascinating story. We don't have time to get into all the details. But the short version is Balaam agrees, and he comes to curse Israel, and he goes out and he looks upon Israel, and he goes to speak a curse.

But instead of a curse, a blessing comes out. And he blesses them. And he's confused, and Balak is furious. So Balak says, What are you doing? And he says, Let's try again.

And so he takes them to another place. He says, All right, there's Israel. Curse them. And he says, Okay. And he goes to curse them again. And again, he blesses them. So Balak gets even more angry. And so Balak says, A third time. Let's try one more time.

Let's go to another place. So they go to another high place. They look down on Israel, and for a third time, Balaam blesses the people that he's been paid to curse. And so Balak is furious.

And he says, I paid you all this money, and you've blessed my enemy three times. Now they're stronger. And what we find out later in Numbers chapter 31 is that Balaam responds, and he says, Okay, the overt attack is not going to work on these people.

[9 : 00] But I've got a plan. Seduce them. Seduce them with idol worship. Seduce them with sensuality.

Seduce them, and then they'll fall apart from the inside. And in fact, that attack is quite devastating. And so by referring to this, what Jesus is saying to the church is, he's saying this, he's saying the real danger that we face in a place like D.C.

is not external. The real threat is not the secularization of the West. Right? The real threat is not limits to religious freedom. The real threat is not the social rejection that we might experience by our neighbors and coworkers.

Now these are important issues, and some of you work on issues like religious freedom. So they're important, but that's not the real threat to the church. The real threat is not external. It is internal, from the inside out.

It's like termites in your home. The real threat is the spiritual seduction to idol worship. And there are a couple of things that this shows us that we need to see about the seductive power of idols.

[10 : 14] The first thing that we can see is this, that the spiritual seduction that we're talking about is not something that happens through our intellect. It happens through our body and how we use our body.

So in verse 14, Jesus mentions eating food sacrificed to idols, and He mentions sexual immorality. And the word that is translated sexual immorality is actually a broad word that can mean indulging in your lusts, any one of your lusts, in a kind of unlawful way.

And so the focus here is on bodily indulgence. And so the issue is not simply that these things are wrong or bad or they're on God's list of things that we should avoid.

The real issue and the real concern, and this is the insight that the Bible gives us, that you're not going to find in a lot of other places. Here's what it tells us, is that the way we use our bodies, what we do with our bodies, is tremendously important.

That most of us don't realize that our bodies are actually the gateway to our hearts and to our desires. And what we do with our bodies, particularly the repeated habits and patterns and rituals that we live within day in and day out, those have a massive formative impact on our hearts and on our desires.

[11 : 40] Our bodies are the gateway to our hearts. And so what happens is, over time, as we unthinkingly, unthinkingly and uncritically imbibe the pleasures of a culture, we come to love the idols of that culture.

When we are uncritically enjoying the pleasures of a culture, we can very easily come to love the idols of that culture. Right? So people hear about idol worship and they think, well, what's the big deal?

I would never worship an idol. You know, the idea of worshiping an idol in this day and age feels very primitive and ancient and pagan and weird. And people say, well, I would never do that.

But the problem with that way of thinking is, we are assuming that idol worship is an intellectual decision that we make. We're treating it like we treat all religion, including Christianity.

We're treating it as though it's just a belief system that we decide to adopt intellectually. And the truth of the matter is it has very little to do with that. It's not something that happens at the level of consciousness.

[12 : 44] Idol worship is much more subtle than that. It happens in us without us realizing. And most of the time, you realize it only when you look back. It's in retrospect that you look back and you realize how much an idol has taken hold of your heart.

Right? So I never consciously chose to worship the idol of consumerism. You know, I didn't look at that belief system and say, that looks pretty good. I think I'll sign up for that.

You know, I mean, what happens, right? I just got used to and started to like the fact that I could go to the grocery store and there were like, you know, 600 different salad dressings I could choose from. You know, or I just got used to the fact that there are, you know, 1,500 different churches that I can choose from that will exactly meet me and do exactly what I want them to do.

And I just started to get used to the fact that I could just swipe left or right on human beings. You know, I got used to being able to customize my order at Chipotle.

I got used to listening to my music with Spotify and then I just started to think that the rest of my life should work like Spotify. So we just sort of become idolatrous without even knowing it.

[13 : 58] It just sort of sinks in on an unconscious level. So that's the first thing is that idol worship is not something that's an intellectual decision. It happens through our bodies and the way we use our bodies.

It's very pre-conscious, subconscious. The second thing that we need to see about this seductive power of idolatry is this. Not only do idols tear us away from the God who made us, but idol worship gives rise to all kinds of beliefs and practices that devalue and dehumanize people.

So you look at any culture, you look at any culture, and you look at the beliefs and practices in that culture that devalue and dehumanize people, and chances are behind those beliefs and practices you will find idol worship.

Right? So the Canaanites, the reference in our passage to the Canaanites, they regularly practiced child sacrifice to Baal. And the reason they did that is because in their culture, fertility was an idol.

They had come to worship fertility. Good weather, abundant crops, lots of kids, that was their idol. And it makes sense in a world that they lived in why fertility would matter.

[15 : 19] But it wasn't just a good thing, it had become an ultimate thing, and it was worth any sacrifice. It was worth whatever it took to guarantee fertility. It was worth sacrificing the life of your child.

That's what it took. Right? So there was an idol underneath this dehumanizing practice. But every culture has examples like this.

Right? So you see some cultures around the world still practice stoning. We say, well, how in the world could anybody do that? Well, underneath that practice you find that family honor has become an idol.

To have honor and to have a good name as a family is a good thing, but that's become an ultimate thing. And when that's the ultimate thing, it's worth any price to maintain that honor. And so you have practices like stoning that result.

Some cultures treat foreigners with contempt, and they treat other people who are of different races or ethnicities with contempt. They're unwelcome. And under that you see the idol of nationalism.

[16 : 20] Right? So these idols exist and they give rise to all kinds of dehumanizing, destructive beliefs and practices. Now, now think about our own culture. And I just spent a little time thinking this week about what are the issues that people in our church have been discussing with me.

What are the concerns that people have talked about with me? And I just, you know, a few examples just from the last couple of weeks. Number one, the fact that we ship millions of tons of waste overseas to some of the poorest countries in the world who have no ability to deal with or process our waste, including e-waste.

And we're literally burying communities of the poor in our garbage. Or the reality of divorce. You know, there's been some really painful struggles recently.

People I know struggling, fighting to save marriages, people wanting to walk out. And what you realize is, again and again, you see people who abandon their spouse and abandon their children because they're looking for personal fulfillment elsewhere.

Or look at gentrification. Just this past week, some of us got together and had a very hard conversation about gentrification. And you know, gentrification is a mixed bag. And yet, what we see is that all too often development, urban development happens with no regard for justice.

[17 : 39] And all too often, the poor are the ones who suffer and are dislocated, ejected from their communities that they grew up in.

Think about the ongoing reality of abortion. A lot of people in our church have been very concerned about the legislation that is being pushed and passed around abortion. We've talked a lot about the Me Too movement and what that has exposed in our society.

This pattern of men in power abusing that power to sexually assault and take advantage of women. And you think about all of these issues and they all seem unrelated and yet I want to ask you this, what do all those issues have in common?

They all have something in common. See, people on the left are concerned about some of these issues. People on the right are concerned about some of these issues and yet all of these issues have the same core cause.

They are all rooted in idol worship and in fact it's the same idol across the board. It's I think one of the most powerful and seductive idols of American culture which is the idol of radical individualism.

[18 : 47] It gives rise to all of these and in every case you see beliefs and practices that are devaluing and dehumanizing people. Beliefs and practices that are declaring some people are more important than other people.

Some lives are more important than other lives. This is the symptom that lets us know that there is an idol at work. And so here's the thing.

It is much easier to spot the idols in someone else's culture than it is your own. We are almost completely blind to the idols that we are enthralled to.

And this is the brilliance of Balaam's strategy because he says here's what Balaam is really saying and here's what Jesus is worried about. Balaam is saying if I can't curse the Israelites what I can do is trick them into cursing themselves because that's what idol worship really is.

When we give ourselves to an idol we are cursing ourselves. We're giving ourselves to something that will destroy us and rob us of our humanity. So this is why Jesus in this passage comes with the sharp two-edged sword as it says in verse 16 the sword of his mouth.

[20 : 06] Because only God's word is able to cut through and pierce our hearts and expose the idols that have colonized us. Only when you hold your life up next to God's word and when you compare your reality and your experience and your priorities and your loves and your desires with God's word with God's calling with God's description of what a human being is and what we're here to do.

When you begin to make that comparison you begin to realize how far off the rails we have gone. And so Jesus warns us about the two-pronged attack of persecution on the one hand and seduction on the other and while we might be able to resist persecution we can easily be taken in by the idols of our age.

And yet Jesus doesn't leave us in this place he also gives us a promise and it's an amazing two-part promise. Verse 17 he says this to the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna and I will give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.

So let me just explain these images so we understand what's happening here. First he says I'm going to give the one who conquers hidden manna. Now what's that? Well again this is referring us back to the time when Israel was in the wilderness.

When they were in the wilderness they were starving and so God sustains them with manna right? Bread that comes from the sky and God instructs his people to take some of this bread from heaven and to put it in a jar and to put that jar in the ark of the covenant.

[21 : 54] Hide the manna away. No one is allowed to touch it. Not even the priests are allowed to touch the hidden manna because God says this is for future generations. You're going to save some of this for future generations so that they know and remember that I'm the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt and set you free.

Right? So it's set apart for future generations. So what is Jesus saying? He's saying to his church, he's saying to us, that hidden manna that was set apart so long ago, that's for you. It was for you.

He had you in mind when he set it aside to begin with. And Jesus is saying to the one who conquers, you will eat of that manna, that heavenly bread. And you know again, we every week we can't come to this table and we eat the bread that comes from heaven.

We eat not just bread and wine, but we eat the body of Christ, the blood of Christ. He sustains us within himself, the hidden manna. And the promise that Jesus gives is that we will eat this meal together every time we gather until that great wedding supper of the Lamb.

And so the invitation corresponds to the warning that we saw a few minutes ago. Right? We talked about how our appetites and our desires can lead us to be seduced by idols.

[23 : 11] And they dehumanize us. And Jesus is saying if you can hold out, if you can resist the seductive power of idols and instead of trying to get nourished, instead of trying to get your needs met there, eat the bread that comes from heaven.

Eat the food that doesn't dehumanize you but rehumanizes you. Come to the table and eat a meal that will make you more truly and fully human. That's the invitation.

The hidden manna, it was set aside, it's for you. Come and eat. And then the second promise Jesus makes concerns a white stone. He says you'll be given a white stone with your name on it.

And again, this points us back to the wilderness. We remember that the high priest, the high priest of the people of Israel had a breast plate. And on that breast plate, there were stones and on each stone was a name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel.

And so Jesus is saying, I am the great high priest and I have a stone with each of your names on it. And you know, when the Bible talks about your name, it's not just talking about phonetics, right?

[24 : 20] The Bible is talking about your entire character, your entire personality, your identity. And so Jesus is saying, I have a stone with your true name on it, with your true identity written on it.

And so the invitation is when we come to him, we are given that stone, we are given that name and that identity. And so again, it's an invitation away from idols.

He says if you give yourself to an idol, that idol will dehumanize you. It will rob you of your identity. It will convince you that you're someone or something else. You know, this is the great irony of idols.

If I worship beauty, if beauty is the thing that matters most and I want to be attractive and I want to be the most beautiful person in the room, what happens? I will always feel ugly. I will always feel ugly.

If I worship intelligence and I want to be the smartest guy in the room, I'm going to spend every day feeling stupid, feeling like a fraud, terrified that somebody's going to find out that I'm not as smart as they think I am.

[25 : 22] And on and on and on. That's how idols work. They convince us to believe lies about ourselves. But Jesus says if you come to me, I will give you your true identity.

I'll give you your true purpose. You'll finally figure out who you really are. And this name is infinitely particular. He says no one knows it except the one who receives it.

And me, Jesus. And that means that you are infinitely particular. And isn't that ironic? We live in this individualistic culture and we think that the way to gain a sense of identity is to assert our rights and to express ourselves to the world.

And anybody who gets in the way of that needs to be battered down because only I, only I can determine who I am. That's the road to identity. And Jesus says no. If you try to keep yourself, if you try to define yourself and hold on to yourself, you're going to lose yourself.

But if you give yourself away, if you give yourself to me, then the day will come when we see each other face to face and I will give you the identity that you've been looking for your whole life and it will make sense.

[26 : 24] And you will know that you are so infinitely particular that there never has been nor will there ever be anyone quite like you. You know, I was just recently at a gathering celebrating the life of Fred Rogers.

And somebody talked about the power of that message that Mr. Rogers would always talk about how unique and how special each child was. What was interesting is this is a room full of adults.

But as this person described that message, the adults were hanging on every word. Right? With bated breath. Every single grown up child in that room was still longing to know that.

I do matter to somebody. I am infinitely particular. The way I'm made up somehow has value and meaning. I'm not like this by accident. And so what Jesus is saying is I'm going to give you this name and it's going to show you that no one has ever been like you.

No one will ever be like you. And what that means is when God created the heavens and the earth, he had you in mind. The world needed someone exactly like you.

[27 : 33] So these are the promises that were given by Jesus. So this is the two-pronged attack and the two-part promise. The church must be on guard not only against persecution but also against seduction.

The church has held up quite well over the centuries against persecution. By the way, persecution tends to be a good thing. It's seduction that does damage. And then we have this two-part promise.

To the one who conquers, Jesus will sustain us with his own body and he will give to each of us our true name. So let me ask you this final question as we prepare to pray and move on with our service.

as you think about your own life, and you know, I've done a lot of thinking this week. I think, you know, I just, I don't think I've experienced that much direct persecution.

You know, maybe some here and there, but I mean, nothing like what the Bible talks about and you think, is persecution really that big a deal? I really haven't experienced that much. And here, if we're reading this passage, here's what I think we need to ask ourselves.

[28 : 36] If I look at my life and I'm totally honest, is there anything in my life worth persecuting? Is there anything in my life worth persecuting?

Or have I been so seduced, so taken in? Is my faith so compartmentalized and privatized and squishy and compromising and perpetually agnostic that it's not worth time and energy to persecute?

That's a hard question, but I think we need to reflect on that. But here's the hope that if there's anyone here who does desire to stand in the faith and the hope of Jesus Christ, if there's anyone here who does desire to be the one who conquers, as this passage talks about, this is why the gospel is such good news.

Because, you know, in the days of Balaam and Balak, when the Israelites were taken in with idol worship, you know how they put a stop to it? Phinehas, the priest, realizes what's going on.

He goes, he gets a spear, he comes up to one of the Israelites, and he jams the spear through him. He kills him. And that puts a stop to it right quick. But we realize that Jesus is the greater Phinehas.

[29 : 50] He's the greater priest. He's the true high priest. And that when Jesus saw his people totally taken in by idols, and when Jesus saw his people utterly compromised and seduced and inert and spiritually dead, he didn't take up a spear and threaten his people with a spear.

In fact, he allowed himself to be killed by a spear and by nails on the cross at Calvary. And because of that, anyone who comes to Jesus in faith, no matter how compromised or how seduced you may feel that you have become, if you come to Jesus in faith, if you ask for his forgiveness, and if you ask for him to spiritually strengthen you, he will do that.

He will forgive you and he will set you free. Because the truth of the matter is that Jesus Christ is the one who conquers. He's the one who has conquered. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.