

# Revelation 2:12–17

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     verses 12 through 17. And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword, 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. But I have a few things against you. 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 may eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning, and welcome again to Christ Church Chicago. We're so glad that you've come.

I want to title this message today, The Peril of Becoming a Both-And Kind of Church. Let me pray. Our Heavenly Father, I pray now that you would use the words of my mouth, the meditations of my heart, the submission of my life to that which is read before us this morning, to both encourage our hearts, to both of us, alter our hearts, and strengthen us until we see you face to face. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Good writers are known as such in part by their ability to foreground some seemingly small detail in the opening of their work that takes on increased importance as the work goes on.

It might be an object in the opening that they put on display. It might be an event that they describe. It might be a particular detail on the characteristic of an individual which is just laid down in the text in an insignificant way, but later carries great force and impact on the interpretation at the climactic moment.

[ 3 : 0 0 ]     Their ability to do this is what makes you want to read the book again. Their ability to accomplish this is what makes you decide to go to a movie and see it a second time, because as you've worked your way through to the end, you're now recognizing that there were small, seemingly insignificant details that you missed.

It had an important play in the moment of its climax. Let me just say this then. I know beyond a doubt that the literary work of Revelation was penned by somebody worthy of a Pulitzer Prize in literature because they carry this characteristic with them.

Let me give you an example. I want you to look back at a small detail, insignificantly set down in chapter 1, that carries incredible importance as the work goes on.

You ready? In chapter 1, in verse 16, in the midst of a vision of the Son of Man, we read that from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword.

Yet, by the end of the book, and I encourage you to flip over there with me to chapter 19, and this vision at the end of a victorious warrior now coming at the conclusive moment of human history, we read in verse 15 that from his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a ruled rod of iron.

[ 4 : 59 ] The seemingly insignificant detail in chapter 1, well, from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, is by the end an indication that this one has the capacity, the audacity, and the right to make judgments that cut to the heart and the bone and the marrow and divide the nations.

How does that work its way out in our own text? Well, you'll see that that detail is present in verse 12.

The angel of the church at Pergamum write the words of him who has a sharp, two-edged sword. Hidden in our text to the church in Pergamum is the characteristic of Jesus that gives him the word that will judge the hearts of every human.

In fact, look at chapter 2 in verse 16. If his word is not heard in Pergamum, if not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

And so in our own text, we are mirroring in bookended form what the book of Revelation is saying as a whole. Jesus is saying to the church in Pergamum that you are living under the threat of being judged, cut, declared guilty for some act of iniquity.

[ 6 : 53 ] Let me put it as clearly as I can. You and I are reading the mail of a church where the sword is already unsheathed and hangs over the head of that local congregation.

Let me put a picture on the predicament of being a member of the church in Pergamum. Some of you might be aware of a legend where Damocles sees one who is on the throne ruling and he sees all the privileges and happiness that comes with power.

And he says, oh, for a day, a day when I would sit on that kind of throne. And so the king gives Damocles the day and he sits upon the throne ready to receive all the accolations of power.

And yet what the king had done was hang directly over his head a sword that was being held by a single thread.

The point of the legend is clear. There are perils that come with power. And the sword of judgment will fall on those who hold it.

[ 8 : 26 ] Now that's an interesting picture to put on the predicament of the church in Pergamum. Because Pergamum was a center in Asia Minor for the rule of Rome.

It's where, in one sense, the pro-council dwelt. It's where the throne of Rome ruled. In fact, there was a great statue to Zeus and others.

And in those city streets dwelt, in one sense, the political power of a nation for the region. So whereas the church in Ephesus had advantages of trade and commerce, where the church of Smyrna had the advantages of trade in inland rivers, Pergamum now sits inland, but it is like what Washington, D.C.

would be in contrast to New York City. It would be to dwell in a church where the imperial worship, even of Caesar, was first taking place.

Pergamum was known for this. The deification of Caesar, the worship of the throne of the Roman rule. And now, Jesus comes to this church and talks to them about their predicament.

[ 9 : 55 ] Let me put it as clearly as I can. Jesus was aware of the peril for this church of becoming a both-and kind of place, of holding on to something essential while failing to relinquish a grasp on that which was not only unnecessary, but immoral.

It wanted its cake and to eat it too. It didn't like the either-or-ness of the Lord's revelation. What were they holding fast to?

What were they holding on to that was essential? Well, there it is in verse 13. I know, says the Lord, I know where you dwell, that is, in this city of Pergamum, where Satan's throne is, obviously an indication, again, of the center of Roman rule in Asia Minor.

I know you dwell there, yet you hold fast my name. My name. In a town where Caesar ruled, this church said, Jesus reigns.

And they held fast to it. No, not Caesar, Jesus. Jesus reigns. Enter into the church at Pergamum as a visitor, you would have sung about the name, the name of Jesus.

[ 11 : 40 ] You would have been amongst men and women who lifted up the name of Jesus. You would have been among those in children's classes who learned about the name of Jesus, the one through whom forgiveness of sins might be had.

In fact, it says there, you not only held fast to my name, he says, and a second thing they're holding on to, which they needed to, you did not deny the faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

They didn't deny the faith. What was the faith? That Jesus came, lived a righteous life, died a sacrificial death, made a righteous atonement before the Father, and through his name, forgiveness could be had.

So here's a church that not only in their worship is praising the name of Jesus, but they are holding out forgiveness to everyone in that name, even, even, it says, amidst incredible duress.

And he recalls the days of a particular individual by the name of Antipas, which we know nothing else about, who evidently, in that city, gave up his life for the name, a martyr of the faith.

[ 13 : 07 ] faith. Think about it. Back to last week, the church at Smyrna was told that things were going to go from bad to worse.

That in their context, their tribulations, their poverty, their slander, was going to progress to their sufferings, and some being imprisoned, even unto death.

this church has already gone through that gauntlet. They've already seen in their midst severe persecution of the sort that actually took the life of a believer.

And they held on, passed the test. They didn't deny the faith. And so, one thinks that they're in good shape until verse 14 comes.

Oh, those small little words in the biblical text, those conjunctions and those tiny things that move the thought of a writer along. The indication here that I know you live in a difficult place.

[ 14 : 19 ] I know that you confess my name. I know that you do not deny the faith. I know you've even done all of that at the cost of someone's life. But, but, I have a few things against you.

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, sacrifice to idols, and practice sexual immorality.

So also, you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. They're holding fast to that which is essential, verse 13, while here holding on to teachings that they should have relinquished in light of the rule of Christ.

The peril of becoming a both and kind of church. What were they holding on to that they should have let go of?

What was this teaching that, if not relinquished, would loosen the sword, which by now hangs over them by a single thread?

[ 15 : 40 ] I take the language in verse 14 about those who hold the teaching of Balaam, which is a look back to an Old Testament illustration, to be equated with what ends in verse 15, so also you have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

The teachings of Balaam are nothing different in the old world with the teachings of the Nicolaitans in your world. These are the same thing. What Balaam did in the past that I can recall by way of illustration for you are and is nothing less than what some of you hold.

What did Balaam hold? Balaam, interestingly, was not an Old Testament Jewish prophet. He was a Mesopotamian prophet who was enlisted by Israel's enemies to curse Israel herself.

And, if you know anything about the story, while he wanted to gain money to do so, and while he wanted to live in a licentious way outside of God's word, God, nevertheless, never let him curse God's people.

But what Balaam did was go to Balak and say, you know, if you want God's people to be compromised, if you want to work your way into the local church in ways that by their teaching have them become a both-and kind of church, then all you need to do is to infiltrate their ranks with Bible teachers who would permit their Christian followers to eat the food sacrificed to idols and to live in licentious ways sexually that go beyond the design of God's good plan in Genesis.

[ 17 : 39 ] He says, if you do that, you've got them from the inside out. And so it happened. Eating the food sacrificed to idols.

You know, I've said this before, but I have a grandson. I've got nine grandchildren now. Isn't that great?

Nine of them. And while I never told stories about my own children from the pulpit, I'm becoming increasingly inclined to start telling you stories about my grandchildren because they're not here.

I'm not here. I have one such grandson at the age of four who had to eat food that in his mind wasn't food he wanted to eat.

You know, the Jews were not to eat pork, for instance, in the Old Testament. There was, even beyond the notion of what was sacrificed to idols, there were certain foods that were restricted to them.

[ 18 : 45 ] Well, listen to the nighttime prayer of my four-year-old grandson just a week ago. Dear God, please help us that we had pork tonight and please help us that that's the last time I have to have pork in all the days that you created.

I mean, the flourish at the end. My daughter, mother to my four-year-old grandson, said it took everything in her, not to just burst out laughing in the midst of his prayer, but he was dead serious.

That was his prayer at night. Dear God, help us that we had pork tonight and please help us that that is the last time I have to eat pork in all the days that you created.

There's something a little more in play here about this food sacrifice to idols and particularly in its combination with sexual immorality. In the Roman world, unlike ours, there were guilds and gods.

and if you were a member of the guild, a particular trade, for instance, the lawyers guild, the thread-making guild, then you would have to attend these ceremonies in which they would pray to the Roman gods to bless their economic efforts and their outplay and you would go to the temple to do so and they would sacrifice food to these gods, to these idols and around these temples were temple prostitutes and you would actually intermingle your body with those in the temple under that god looking for the blessing of all things that your own business would flourish.

[ 20 : 50 ] In other words, in Pergamum, there was a readily available opportunity for every man and woman to compromise the name of Jesus and to live their lives in ways where they had a foot in both worlds because if you want to be involved in the economic trade of the city, you would actually be partaking of the foods that were offered to the gods and if you wanted to live your life in a way where you had access to the city, well, the design of God is put forward in creation through Genesis of one man and one woman, well, that would not apply and what you did with your body, well, that was just simply up to you and so what he's saying is that he's in a church where they want to hold Jesus and you want to hold the faith while holding this compromised way of life in the world which doesn't honor

God's design and notice it was particularly the teachers. Now, you're going to see next week what happens beyond the Bible teachers to the actual practice in the congregation but remember this, the church at Ephesus had a hatred for the teaching of the Nicolaitans but while they had a hatred for the teaching, they had no love either for God, Christ, or their neighbors who were living in ungodly ways they had lost their first love while holding fast to their doctrine but in this church, Pergamum, the teaching was that you didn't have to hate the teaching of the Nicolaitans that there really was nothing morally prescribed that could be defined as the term here, sexual immorality and yet the Bible words have

Bible meanings and the word here for sexual immorality would include things like premarital sex, it would include fornication in the sense of having sexual relations with anyone that's not your lifelong committed partner, a man and a woman, it would include and does in the Bible homosexuality, that is the active participation in this sexual activity, it would include bestiality, this word is a word that governs things in the Bible that God calls immoral, not merely legal or illegal or ethical or unethical but moral or immoral.

It's a church who wanted to be both and. So what happens? Well you can see now just how contemporary this is, can't you?

Who in the world today isn't wrestling with church life in terms of holding fast to Jesus and the Christian faith but wondering what to do on whether or not I actually need to jettison the Bible's teaching on a one flesh relationship.

[ 24 : 39 ] You see according to the Bible what God created a man and a woman is what he intended one flesh and according to Jesus words in Matthew not mine he says that what God created he intended and he says and what he intended is not to be broken.

Think of what's happening today. I think it was just last week the United Methodist Church my father grew up in the Methodist Church filled with Christians throughout the world is wrestling with this very thing.

I think last week they just repealed their ban on ordaining clergy that would come to a definition of well you can have Jesus and this too.

Now the reason they were able to repeal it without any debate was they had been debating this for years and 8,000 congregations local churches like Pergamum or Christ Church Chicago 8,000 congregations saw the writing on the wall in the denomination that said yeah we're going to do Jesus and this and 8,000 said we're gone and because they left the denomination suddenly you arrive at a point in history where the repeal of the ban is there and life will move on and the Methodist Church as an institution I'm not talking about particular congregations or members the Methodist Church as an institution is now today as of the last week or so for the first time since Wesley and Asbury and all the boys brought the gospel on horseback is now a both and kind of church and according to our text the sword of Pergamum the sword of Damocles hangs over by a single thread the Roman

Catholic Church just think of you're going to read about these things over the next years you've been reading about them already the Roman Catholic Church is trying to thread the needle on how do I hold fast to the faith and Jesus and yet understand that I am necessarily needing to deal with men and women who are wrestling with sexuality and needing to come into the communion in ways that find faith and they're going to try to thread the needle and they basically have said it's permissible now for the priest to pronounce a blessing on a same-sex union but we still declare that marriage is between a man and a woman I'm just telling you that's the way they're wrestling with it and it's not going to hold you can't thread this needle the

[ 28 : 06 ] Protestant Church and I speak to Bible teachers in our church and in our city that aren't affiliated with major denominations there's not a church in the country that isn't having to wrestle with being a both and kind of church there's not a family in our midst that doesn't have to wrestle with what do I do with the name and the faith and the sexual mores of my city Rico Tice who formerly was the senior rector at All Souls in Langham in London a famous church for reasons in the 20th century that John Stott some of you will know that name anchored its ministry he recently resigned and has now taken up membership in a Presbyterian church of all places it was supposed to be humorous in the midst of seriousness and Rico said that he couldn't any longer retain membership in a church that was officially tied to the Anglican communion under the Archbishop of Canterbury because of their recent last summer movements on these very issues and so he said I can't do it anymore and you're going to see this happening over the next years you're going to have some people staying in the Roman Catholic church and in the Methodist church and in the Presbyterian churches and you're going to see people staying in and trying to speak for the fact that they individually are not a both and kind of person and they're going to work in reform ways but by and large the next five years you're going to see a complete wash in churches and individuals and you yourself won't be able to escape it are you a both and church is going to come down to are you a both and

Christian and according to the text in front of us the word from Jesus is that for those who determine to be both and there's a peril and the peril is there in verse 16 16 I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth this is particularly important for anyone in our midst who is a Bible teacher what God created he intended what he intended Jesus said is not to be broken and although it is broken we now speak of the peril of being a both and person let me say something that's really important to say

I don't want to become the Ephesian church who hates the teaching and lost their love come on can I this must be said for one to hold to the name and to the faith as biblically defined cannot for us mean a loss of love a loss of walking with working alongside in conversation but our teaching must be clear because we will not be a both and church what are the consequences for you personally as you work this out in your own life the consequences are there's a peril if you will insist on being both and on the flip side there are implications for holding on to that which we should and letting go of that which the Bible asks us to let go of and it's worth hearing that because without the upside of the exchange it will be very difficult for you to relinquish those views verse 17 he who has an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches now notice it's plural whatever was going on for Pergamum is going on for all the churches you and

I are now involved in the text if you have an ear today this is what the spirit of God is saying through the word and to the one who conquers the one who is victorious the one who faithfully executes this perilous precipice he says 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 there are evidently promises from Jesus for the church and the Christian who holds on to that which is essential and is willing to relinquish their grip on that which is immoral and the benefits are hidden manna a white stone and you're like what is that hidden manna well in the Hebrew scriptures the people of God were in a bad way wandering in the wilderness and unable to provide their daily needs and God provides bread from heaven and every day they had just enough they had food so in some measure as you forego the food sacrificed to idols as you forego compromising your personal and professional way in the world

[ 35 : 20 ] God promises that as you forego the food of the world he will provide food for you from heaven now we know Jesus comes along and says I'm the bread of heaven so in one sense the hidden manna is Jesus the name which you hold to if you if you Jesus is saying if you hold me and you let go of the world you get me you get me I will feed you forever more I mean what a vision we've got here today you're actually going to participate in the hinted manna made through a sacrament the bread from heaven taken in faith feasting upon him that your soul will be strengthened to live as his child in this world what about the white stone I had to look this one up I had no clue what are you going to do with the white stone and commentators aren't real clear either but there was a couple of them that I thought well that's worth throwing out there in the world that preceded

Rome's rule the world of Greece a white stone signified being clear or not guilty in a court of law so you watch Survivor and they get you know everyone gets a stone they turn it over and you've seen it right no maybe you haven't okay so some of you have many of you haven't but at any rate reality TV has entered into my own world you don't know what team you're going to be on you hold out your hand turn it over if it's black in the ancient world it was an indication of guilt condemnation if the stone that the judge turns over white not guilty in the Roman world the stone shifts to the athletic imagery of Rome's supreme delights and the stone a white stone with the word victor would have been handed to someone who won one of the

Olympic races or particularly something in your city where it was actually your ticket to the after party so the victor would actually get the white stone with the name on it that said when they showed up at the after event entrance well either way if one of these two or both of these two by way of just imperfect analogy are there what Jesus is saying is that the one the one who actually holds on to what they need to hold on to and relinquishes what the world would have you want to join with it you're going to get the declaration from God not guilty which is what you want when you got a sword hanging over your head by a single threat or what you want if you relinquish the sexual mores of our age is the ticket into the life where you become the very bride of Christ oh come on can you not see that as we as we as we relinquish the food of the world we get the feast of his table we get an invitation to his home we get

Jesus we get everything that will satisfy us and this is a good word then for every man woman or child in our midst who's struggling with the sexuality of life in the day in which we live this is the good news of the gospel that as you wrestle this out and hold the name and hold the faith and relinquish what you're being told you're going to get Jesus himself life forevermore complete satisfaction which this world as we all know over promises you but never delivers to you a name that no one knows he knows my name yeah I could sing it and I won't be formed you

God loves you he had a design for you he has a way for us there's a humility that ought to mark us there's a care and concern for our friends and family and neighbors that ought to be evident within us but we we must know that we cannot become a both and church and for those who do a word of his judgment will come just as there is a word of judgment for those who don't but fail to love Lord help us may we be strengthened by this meal to love him well our heavenly father we now come to the table under the word of Christ which was given to

[ 41 : 05 ] Paul that these elements signify something deeper stronger something beyond what we can see or know that when Jesus took the bread at Passover he changed that ancient meal to remind God's people of his provision for them in the wilderness to an indication for us that he will give us the food we need even though our souls are parched and searching this way and that for satisfaction may Jesus be our ultimate satisfaction and we know that he took the cup after supper saying that this cup is the new covenant in his blood that Jesus washes away all sin he receives any who come to him he will receive all who profess his name he will cleanse us of all unrighteousness he's ready and willing to make us clean and to give us admittance into your kingdom help each one then today who professes

Christ to be strengthened in Christ's name amen men