

# 7 Letters to 7 Churches: Pergamum

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, I'd like to open this morning with a slightly far-fetched imaginary situation.

Let's say there's an imaginary couple. Their names are David and Marsha, and they're about to celebrate their 10th wedding anniversary. David really goes all out to surprise Marsha. He gets her distracted on a long errand that will kind of take her away from the house. He gets the kids to the grandparents for some babysitting.

He heads to the grocery store and finds some specialty ingredients so he can prepare a really delicious anniversary dinner. He gets home. He gets set to work preparing the food.

He grills the steak. He sautes the asparagus. He takes the rice pilaf off the stove, and about that time, Marsha walks in the front door. And the candles are lit.

[ 1 : 03 ] There's this beautiful vase of flowers propping up the perfect anniversary card. And the food is just steaming ready on the table. Marsha is swept off her feet by this gesture of romance.

But then, as David's stepping towards Marsha to embrace her, the front door opens behind her. And another man walks in.

And he comes in, bearing some packages and bags, and sets them down. He says, here you go, honey. And then he takes his shoes off and heads over to the dinner table and begins cutting up some steak.

David is understandably flabbergasted. And he says, Marsha, who in the world is this guy? What's going on?

And she says, oh, you mean Brian? He's the other man in my life. Haven't I told you about him? He's really sweet. I'm sure you guys will be really good friends.

[ 2 : 05 ] I love him a lot. Not as much as I love you, of course. But he makes up for the ways where you don't completely satisfy me. You don't mind if he stays, right?

Why did that scene that I thought would elicit some laughter but didn't? Why did that scene that describes this beautiful and ideal situation suddenly transition to something inappropriate and revolting?

It's because the pure beauty of intimate fellowship was compromised. Majorly compromised. And the letter that Elise read for us a few moments ago, Jesus is confronting his church.

And it has to do with a compromise of intimate fellowship between him and his church. So let's turn our attention to this letter together.

If your Bible isn't already open to Revelation 2, go ahead and pop it open. We're in Revelation 2, verses 12 through 17. And as we work our way through this letter, let's keep that story in the back of our mind.

[ 3 : 29 ] This compromise of intimate fellowship. When we come to the end of the letter, we'll put the pieces together and we'll see what exactly Jesus is telling the church at Pergamum then.

And we'll seek to apply that to what he's telling Christ the King Church now. Pastor Mike's been helping us see the past few weeks. We've been in these seven letters to the seven churches. Ephesus first. Last week was Smyrna. This week is Pergamum. And he's been helping us see that there's a similar structure to these letters that just runs all the way through. There's seven parts. Seven little pieces that fit together. And we're going to guide our way through them. And they all start with C. So it should be pretty easy to follow along. We'll move through each part. And at the end, we'll try to put them together and say, okay, what's Jesus saying?

And what's he saying to us? So, C number one. The first part of this letter. Verse 12. It's church.

[ 4 : 32 ] Let's check out the church. Look at verse 12. And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write. So, it's kind of important to know this body of believers that lived 2,000-ish years ago in this town called Pergamum.

What was life like for them? It's going to help us understand what that's saying to us now. So, what do we need to know about Pergamum and the believers who live there? First, Pergamum was a large and it was a rich city.

It had a population of about 150,000 about the time John was writing. About the size of Kenosha County's population. And it was built on and around this big hill that basically served as its civic and religious center.

And it was the first city-state in Asia to make a deal with the Roman Empire as the Roman Empire was starting to expand its territory.

And because they made this deal, it got some special privileges. And said, hey, you can take over us. No problem. Just make sure that we get a better deal than the rest of the people around us. And Rome was like, sure.

[ 5 : 45 ] So, they got some special privileges. They got some status. And one of the big badges of honor that they received was they got to build a temple to the emperor. Last week, we saw how Smyrna was really big on the idea of emperor worship.

Remember that Domitian had been saying, worship me. Just make sure you do a little bit of nod of loyalty to me. Once a year, offer some incense at my temple.

You'll be okay. And to build for a city to be able to build a temple to the emperor within its own walls was a big deal. And Pergamum, not to imagine how one, it was two.

It was kind of like hosting the Summer Olympics twice. It was a big deal. Another really important thing to understand about Pergamum before we move on is this. It was a center for pagan cult worship.

So, not only did they have a big emperor worship thing going on, they had lots of gods and big temples to these different gods. For one thing, there was a huge altar built on the top of the hill to Zeus.

[ 6 : 47 ] And it looked like a big throne at the top of the hill. There were also lots of other temples to other gods like Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Dionysus, the god of wine.

And most popular of all, there was a very big temple built in honor of Asclepius, who was the god of medicine and healing. And this big temple was actually more like a health resort.

People came all over to sleep in his temple and be healed by his power from illness. And his symbol is a staff with a serpent coiling around it.

So, let's all kind of keep that in the back of our mind as we move forward. This is where our brothers and sisters 2,000 years ago lived. That's the context in which they were following Jesus in faith and obedience.

Not exactly a friendly environment for people who were monotheistic. They only worshipped one god. And the god who became a human being was crucified for our sins and rose again from the dead.

[ 7 : 48 ] Not a friendly environment for them. So, with that in our minds, we got wealth, status, we got emperor worship going on, and big idol worship going on.

Let's turn our eyes to the next part of verse 12 and see our second C for the morning. Christ. We've seen the church at Pergamum, where they live, what that was all about.

Now, let's look at the Christ who is addressing them. And to the angel of the church at Pergamum write, the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

Mike's been helping us see the past few weeks that every one of these seven letters begins with, to the angel of the church of the city, write, the words of him who, and then it picks up some part of the vision that John got in the end of chapter one, of seeing the risen, radiant, and reigning Jesus.

There are all kinds of crazy descriptions of Jesus. Glowing feet, fire eyes, white hair. And this particular aspect of the vision is what Pergamum needed to be reminded of.

[ 9 : 03 ] He had a sharp, two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. Now, we're not supposed to draw a picture of Jesus in our heads with a sword coming out of his mouth, literally.

It's a symbol. It's a powerful way to illustrate the cutting, authoritative, judgment-rendering power of the word of the living God.

So like a razor-sharp surgeon's scalpel, it's precise and it's unstoppable. God's word penetrates any and every situation with utter clarity.

He knows every person's heart, and he is able to speak right to the heart of the matter. Because he knows this, not just of our individual hearts, but he knows our church, the exact state of our church,

he is able to speak exactly into the situation, and that's what he was going to do to Pergamum. He was going to get right to the heart of the matter. This is the Christ who speaks to the church at Pergamum. His word is going to rightly divide what is good and true and right from what is wrong, what is evil and false.

[10:24] So let's just kind of take this away for a moment in the back of our minds, and let's see how he's going to speak to the church in Pergamum. Look at C number 3 in verse 13.

C number 3, claim. Let's look at the claim that this Christ, with a two-edged sword coming out of his mouth, the claim that he makes to the church of Pergamum.

Verse 13. I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And then that reference to Satan pops up at the end of verse 13.

Again, where Satan dwells. Jesus knows. It's this both terrifying and yet incredibly comforting picture.

Jesus knows. Nothing is hidden about the situation of the Pergamum believers to him. He knows. And it's the same claim that he's been making to Ephesus, to Smyrna, and he makes to all of the churches.

[11:28] He begins each letter with, I know. I know what's going on. He walks among the seven golden lampstands. He walks among the churches. He is present with us, and he is aware of all that is going on.

And for Pergamum, it is a comforting word of encouragement. He's saying, I know that you live where Satan lives. I know that you live in enemy territory. Jesus is aware that his precious people are in the midst of a society that is under the influence of the evil one.

And Satan's influence is particularly strong in Pergamum. Now, we don't know exactly what this reference to Satan's throne is. It could be the great big altar to Zeus at the top of the hill.

It could be the serpent symbolism with Asclepius, the serpent entwining itself around the staff. It could be the emperor worship going on in the city. Nobody's exactly sure. But at the very least, the combination of all these, idol worship, emperor worship, all the political and social pressure that went along with these, that was enough for the believers to feel like they were living in Satan's backyard.

And how comforting would it be to hear on the Messiah's lips, I know where you live. Imagine the effect that would have on you if you lived within the shadow of Zeus' throne.

[12:51] Or you were down the street from Asclepius' snake temple. Or you could smell the incense burning in the temple to the emperor. However, Jesus has not forgotten his people here, there, anywhere.

He knows exactly what is going on. He knows. And following this comforting claim is our fourth scene. Jesus' commendation.

Jesus commends his church for the way that they have borne faithful witness to him in Satan's city. Look at the middle of verse 13. Yet you hold fast my name.

You did not deny my faith, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you where Satan dwells. The church at Pergamum had a history of faithful witness.

They were no slouches in evangelism. They were no slouches in terms of taking heat. And Jesus has not forgotten it, and he hasn't overlooked it.

[13:57] They have held fast his name. They have not denied their faith in him. In fact, one of their number had been so faithful that he was faithful unto death.

Antipas. And we don't know exactly when Antipas died, whether it was pretty recent from receiving this letter, whether it was kind of more in the distant past. But at the very least, this church was under such pressure that one of their number had been murdered because of his faith.

And if Antipas was murdered, then it's a pretty good guess the rest of the church was facing some kind of oppression and persecution and social pressure. It might have been imprisonment.

It could have been loss of livelihood. But they had remained faithful. They had been in the face of hostility and pressure, and Jesus commends them for their faithful witness.

But, let's look at verses 14 and 15. After the commendation comes a stinging critique. It is the critique of compromise.

[15:05] Read verses 14 and 15 with me. 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.

So also, you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So, what is going on at the church of Pergamum that this critique is leveled against them?

Well, in short, although they are faithful in their external witness to the pagan culture around them, they are an overly tolerant church.

And their over-tolerance of voices within the church is causing them to have their intimate relationship with Jesus compromised.

The church as a whole is allowing some members of the church to hold and apparently promote a false teaching.

[16:14] And Jesus names the false teachers in verse 15, the Nicolaitans. In verse 14, Jesus associates the heresy of the Nicolaitans with a very effective false teacher from the Old Testament, whose name was Balaam.

Anybody heard of Balaam's donkey? It's that Balaam. Okay, so what is it? What is this teaching of the Nicolaitans that is Balaam-like, and how is it causing the church of Pergamum to compromise their intimate relationship with Jesus?

Well, we've got to go back to the Old Testament for that one. In the book of Numbers in the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, back when the people of Israel were traveling through the wilderness from Egypt on their way to the Promised Land, they were passing the territory of the Moabites.

And the king of the Moabites, whose name was Balak, was feeling threatened by the Israelites. And so he found a prophet for hire, whose name was Balaam, who loved gold more than anything else. And he hired him to put a curse on Israel. This is a common thing these days. If you were a king and you didn't like your enemies, you could hire a prophet to put a curse on him with some god, and usually it worked.

[17:31] So the problem was, though, that whenever Balaam opened his mouth to curse the Israelites, God filled it with blessing. And it happened three times, and finally Balaam's like, stop it, just stop it.

So the obvious power play of God cursing the Israelites, getting God through paying Balaam to curse the Israelites, obviously is not going to work.

But instead of external opposition, Balaam advised Balak to go a different route that was far more sinister.

He's like, listen, Balak, you're not going to get these guys by having God curse them. God's not going to do it. He's promised good to them.

He made promises way back to Abraham. He's not going to go back on his word. Here's how you get them. You get God angry with them. If you really want to destroy the Israelites, you've got to get God mad at them.

[18:29] And how are you going to get God mad at them, Balak? You tempt them to break faith with God. Send out your prettiest girls to the Israelite camp.

Have them mix it up, fraternize a little bit with the Israelite men, and seduce them to come and worship your gods. Their God is a jealous God.

And he is not going to like it if they worship your gods and him. And then he'll punish them. That's how you get them.

Well, that's exactly what happened. Just like verse 14 says, Balaam taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols, the Moabite idols, and practice sexual immorality.

And that's what they did. And because Israelites compromised their exclusive, intimate relationship with the one God, he visited them with judgment.

[19:31] A terrible plague swept through the Israelite camp as a result of their compromise. And it was only stopped because of a guy named Phineas, who was a priest.

And he saw an Israelite man holding his Moabite girlfriend's hand and go into the tent to worship. And he grabbed a spear, he ran into the tent, and killed them both.

And it stopped the plague. Decisive and immediate action to stop the compromise was what was needed to preserve the intimate relationship between God and his people.

Okay, but what does that Old Testament story have to do with the church in Pergamum? Well, the Nicolaitans were acting like Balaam. They were convincing the church, the other believers in the church, to have a closer and more intimate relationship with the pagan culture around them.

And it was compromising their intimate and exclusive fellowship with the risen, radiant, and reigning Jesus. It was kind of a Jesus plus other gods approach.

[ 20 : 43 ] Sure, the Nicolaitans were saying, worship Jesus, trust Jesus, listen to Jesus. But you can also participate in the pagan culture around you. That way, you don't take as much heat.

Because if you're only worshipping Jesus and you're not worshipping the other gods, these people are coming after you. I mean, haven't we suffered enough? For the church in Pergamum, who lived in Satan's city, you've got to admit, sounds pretty good.

I get Jesus, and I don't take the heat for it. Well, it probably worked itself out in some kind of emperor worship. Maybe Nicolaitans were saying, take a pinch of incense, you don't have to mean it, just do it.

Or maybe it was particularly affecting the believers in the church in Pergamum, who were losing their livelihood because of their businesses were suffering because they couldn't participate in the pagan trade guilds.

The pagan trade guilds were basically our version of trade unions today. If you wanted to have a decent business, you had to be in the guild. But the problem was, for a Christian, that each guild had their own pagan god sponsor.

[ 21 : 56 ] And you had to participate in those festivals to be a part of the guild. And if you didn't, your livelihood was in trouble. And the Nicolaitans were saying, just stop being so tight about it.

Just worship Jesus, but give in a little bit. Whatever the exact details of this Nicolaitan teaching was, it was causing them to compromise their pure and exclusive devotion to Jesus alone.

It was a kind of spiritual adultery. It was the guy walking in the door and intruding in on the intimate fellowship between Christ and his bride.

Now, this whole idea of God being a jealous God, it shows up here. Jesus is saying, don't be eating at that table.

Don't go and participate in fellowship with the pagan gods. And it's right for God to have that kind of approach. I'm a jealous husband.

[ 23 : 02 ] I don't want my wife in a relationship with another man. No self-respecting husband does. No self-respecting wife wants her to share her husband with anybody else. It is right that we should keep our relationships in marriage sacred and pure.

And it is the same with our relationship with Jesus. So the devotion of this church was getting divided, and their zeal for him was getting diluted.

And sadly, the church was letting the intruder stay. And this was a problem. That's the critique. Let's move to our sixth C.

Let's hear Jesus' correction to his church. Look at verse 16. Therefore, repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

Jesus calls his church to correct their course and repent. Turn around. Go the right way. But what exactly does that look like? Does that just mean saying, I'm sorry?

[ 24 : 14 ] Well, what's the problem? The problem is they've got members in their church who are holding to and they're promoting a false teaching that is causing spiritual compromise in their relationship with Jesus.

And so repentance for the Pergamum church looks like confrontation, and if necessary, church discipline of those who hold to and promote the false teaching.

Some courageous, zealous, and Phineas-like action was needed to discern the issue and remove the cancer from the midst of the church before it was too late.

And this is confirmed by the rest of verse 16. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. Man, imagine us being gathered together as a church and hearing that read.

I will come soon and make war on these members who are unrepentantly promoting this false teaching. Either they as a church had to eliminate the intruder, or Jesus himself was going to come and do it.

[ 25 : 29 ] And there's that sharp two-edged sword again. This is something that we don't really like thinking about too much in the church nowadays, but we have to. For the sake of his glory and for the good of his church, Jesus won't let us remain compromised.

He disciplines his people. Why? Why can't he just tolerate it, sweep it under the rug? Because he has purchased a people with his blood.

And his intention, as Ephesians 5 says, is to cleanse her and wash her with his word so he can present her to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing so that she can be holy and without blemish.

And as we sang this morning, he's worthy of that. He is worthy of our pure and uncompromised devotion. And by the way, the next time that sword of Jesus' mouth pops up in the book of Revelation, it's in Revelation 19 when he's coming to judge the nations with his sword, with his word.

So when he returns and makes all things right, that's the end. And he is judging his church, purifying his church before that so they don't have to face that.

[ 26 : 58 ] So that's the correction. Now let's look at our final C. The call. Look at verse 17. He who has an ear, let him hear what the church, 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.

It's kind of easy to skip over that first sentence because it's in all of the letters. But the call that Jesus is making first is a call to listen. It's a call to hear.

The Spirit is speaking. If you have ears, make sure they're listening. Carefully, personally, fearfully, and obediently.

It's not just good advice. It's authoritative proclamation and command. And then comes the call. The call to overcome.

[ 28 : 13 ] And the promise that comes with the call to overcome. Jesus promises the overcomer, who essentially is the one who repents, the one who stays faithful, the one who stays uncompromised.

Jesus promises the overcomer participation in the hidden manna, along with a white stone with a new name written on it that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Well, what's going on with all this? Well, they're tricky symbols. Scholars go back and forth. But I think if we look at the letter as a whole, and the overall theme of the letter, I think it starts to make some sense.

The main temptations that the Nicolaitans were presenting to Pergamon believers was a greater share in what the society around them had to offer.

Ease, comfort, pleasure, at the cost of compromising their exclusive allegiance to Jesus. And there's another reference to food and eating in this letter.

[ 29 : 16 ] It's back up to verse 14. We have the hidden manna here in verse 17. And then we have what they were being tempted to do, which was to eat food sacrificed to idols. Two references to food.

So the Nicolaitans were essentially tempting the Pergamon believers to eat at the table of the pagan culture while still confessing Jesus as Lord. But Jesus is saying, no, you can't do that. It's me or them. You can't have both. But if you overcome by staying faithful in your devotion to me and me alone, you are welcome at my table.

So both that reference to the hidden manna, the bread that God fed the Israelites with in the wilderness, as well as the white stone with a new name on it, I think they're pointing to an invitation to intimate fellowship with Jesus around his table.

That white stone that Jesus mentions was often used as an invitation to a banquet feast in ancient Greco-Roman culture. So Jesus is telling his church in this final call to overcome, people, listen to me.

[ 30 : 28 ] You can only feast at one table, mine or the world's. Don't compromise the intimate fellowship that you have with me by mixing it up with loyalties and priorities of the culture around you.

You have to choose one. If you choose the world, you will taste of my judgment. You will be consumed by the sword of my mouth. But if you choose exclusive fellowship with me and reject any and all intruders, you will not be left unsatisfied.

You will taste of my food. Right now, it's unseen. It's hidden manna. It's accessible only by faith. But it's my provision.

It's my banquet feast. And you're invited. Now what about that new name though? It's a little confusing. What are we going to do with that? The new name written on the white stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Well, it could be it's a special new name given to believers at the end of our lives. That's possible. When we're with Jesus, that's possible that could mean that. But all the other references in the book of Revelation to a new name, one of which is right across the page in the letter to the Philadelphians, all these references to a new name are referring to not the believer's new name, but Christ's new name.

[ 31 : 52 ] So it seems that the new name written on the white stone invitation is none other than the only name by which we can gain admission to that great wedding feast, the name of our heavenly bridegroom.

Jesus Christ. So the clue lies in the fact that only those who receive the stone know the name written on it. The rest of the people compromising their relationship with Jesus, they don't know Christ truly.

But the one who shares in his character and in his suffering and is united to him by faith, he, that invitation, is given to the one who is forsaking the table of the world and who gains access at the end of their lives, at the end of their race, to full and unhindered, intimate fellowship with the risen, reigning, and radiant Jesus.

And they can have life to the full in him. It means cost now, great reward then. So we looked at the whole letter, all seven C's.

What is the Spirit saying to the churches in this letter? What is the point? I think we can confidently say it's something like this. Jesus commands uncompromised devotion to him now so that we may have intimate fellowship with him both now and forever.

[ 33 : 19 ] Jesus commands uncompromised devotion to him now so we can have intimate fellowship with him now and forever. And Jesus, the one who commands this uncompromised devotion, is the one who has demonstrated it to us.

He has demonstrated unswerving commitment and love towards us in his grace. He pursued us when we were running away from him. The second person of the Trinity became a man, suffered trying temptations to compromise his own intimate fellowship with his father and he died for unloving and unlovely rebels like us.

And then he rose triumphant over our greatest enemy so we would not have to face God's judgment forever. And it's our right and fitting response to his initiative to zealously guard our devotion to him and to him alone because we are his betrothed bride and he is our bridegroom.

And that may cost us in the here and now but he's saying it's worth it. Our greatest satisfaction is now and forever will be in intimate fellowship with our bridegroom who invites us to feast on his love and his glory now and forever.

Now by faith, forever by sight. So, that's what this letter's about. How are we gonna apply it? What are we gonna do with this?

[ 34 : 59 ] I think there are three questions we can ask ourselves to respond to this message of the Lord Jesus. The first is a conviction question.

Do I really believe that Jesus' table is better than the table of the world? Do I really believe that? Is that my conviction? Is pure and holy intimacy with Jesus actually better than the comfort and the ease and the security that the world offers us if we sit at its table?

Yesterday, I got to hang out with some of the young people from our church and we went to downtown Chicago. A little bit of a field trip. And we walked down Mag Mile, or at least part of it. And that, it's the Fifth Avenue kind of Chicago. It's surrounded by the splendor of man-made architecture and fashion and technology.

[ 36 : 04 ] And you gotta admit, the world has a lot to offer. Seeking comfort and pleasure and ease and advancement at the world's table and in the world's way is appealing.

The cost, right now, not very high. Listen to how one author describes the table of the world. And let me just ask you to be very honest with yourself.

See if anything in this description the Spirit uses to strike home. and say, I think you're tempted toward this. Listen to this. The goal of worldly people is to move forward rather than upward.

To live horizontally rather than vertically. they seek after outward prosperity rather than inward holiness. They burst with selfish desires rather than heartfelt supplications to God.

If they don't deny God, they ignore Him or forget Him or else only use God for their own selfish ends. Worldliness is human nature without God.

[ 37 : 15 ] So that's the world's table. Do we really believe that Jesus' table is better? Is that your conviction?

Here is one reason out of a million others why you should. He has given Himself for you. That you might be with Him forever.

That un-people that He has already demonstrated. Remember that white stone invitation with Christ's name on it? Our dear brothers and sisters needed in Pergamum to remember the real hope they had for eternal joy at Jesus' table because they bore His very name.

And they shared His very character. And we too have a new identity. Christ's. It's bound up with Him. And He desires to feast with you at His table both now by faith and forever by sight.

That's our conviction question. Second is a discernment question. A discernment question. It's this. What voices are we leaving unchallenged in our hearts and maybe within our church that allure us into compromise at the table at the table of the world?

[ 38 : 41 ] What voices are we leaving unanswered, unchallenged that are alluring us to the table of the world? What are the Nicolaitan voices within our culture, within the church herself, and within our hearts?

The hearts, those voices that offer ease of compromise when Christ is calling us to bear the cost of exclusive devotion to Him. the voice of our own pagan culture is alluring us to worship not at the altar of Zeus or Asclepius but at the altar of self.

In America, we are religiously obsessed with the idea of an individual happiness. Not that there's anything wrong with happiness in terms of a gift from God but something wrong with it being our all-consuming devotion.

As believers, we have come to the end of our own self-worship and we've laid our lives down at Christ's feet to be free of our enslavement to self-worship.

But our culture bombards us every day that we and our unfulfilled desires and not God and His glory ought to be the center of the universe.

[ 39 : 55 ] That's a voice we need to challenge. And unfortunately, that voice has infiltrated the church. There's a voice within the church that puts us and our unfulfilled happiness in life at the center of the stage.

And God, He's a helpful and therapeutically supportive best friend who rallies around us as we pursue security and comfort and happiness in the way the world has already prescribed.

And these voices, whether they're books or preachers or whatever it might be, these voices don't really mention sin or repentance very much or especially that really big no-no word, obedience.

But then there's not just a voice inside the church, it's a voice inside our own hearts. We are self-deceiving. Our hearts awaken each day with thoughts of self, anxious thoughts relating to the needs of self, proud thoughts relating to the ambitions of self, envying and lustful thoughts relating to the desires of self.

And these voices are disturbingly sinister and disturbingly natural. As people who gather around Christ's table, we must ask God for discernment to identify these voices and other voices that would seduce us from a pure devotion to Christ.

[ 41 : 22 ] To love Him first and love Him only and to bear witness to Him in the midst of this self-worshipping culture. We need to pray for discernment, particularly for the elders of our church.

They're the ones who are bearing the ultimate shepherding responsibility to identify those unhealthy voices and confront them. So let's pray for discernment.

Lastly, we need to ask an obedience question. An obedience question. Are there patterns in my life in which I am compromising my intimate relationship with Jesus by snacking at the world's table?

Are there patterns in my life where I am compromising my intimate relationship with Jesus by snacking at the table of the world? Now this is a bit of a dangerous question.

I'm not trying to turn us into legalists. I'm not trying to say can't do this, can't do that, can't do this.

But we do need to ask the question. Are there patterns of thought and word and behavior in our lives that resemble the godless culture around us more than the model of self-sacrificing godliness that we find in our Lord Jesus Christ?

[ 42 : 38 ] Maybe the back door to answering this question would be this, to asking another question. How is your relationship with Jesus? Are you aware of a loss of fellowship and a lack of joy in your relationship with Christ?

There are multiple causes for this, but one of them, very possibly, is snacking at the world's table, seeking security, comfort, joy, in the way the world has already said to do it, rather than finding our exclusive devotion in Christ.

So let's ask the Lord to search our hearts and make us aware of any patterns in our lives in which we need to say, I repent and I obey. Where we are not compromising our intimate relationship with Him, but we are devoting ourselves to Him completely.

He is able and He is eager to search our hearts, to make us aware of this, and to lead us in the good path of repentance. There is a joy in abiding in Him and obeying Him as our first and only love.

So church, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Let's pray together. Father, we ask that you would make it our conviction by faith, even on the days when it really doesn't seem like it, that you are worth it, that you are better than what the world offers us. [ 44 : 26 ] Father, would you give us discernment, especially as a church, particularly the elders of our church, would you give discernment that we might walk in a way as a church, as a corporate body, of exclusive devotion to you?

Risen Lord Jesus, would you help us to obey you? Not to snack at the world's table, but to have intimate fellowship with you, now by faith, and forever by sight.

Do a work in us now by your spirit, we pray. In Christ's name, amen.