

# The Seven Letters (4): The Church in Pergamum

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[ 0 : 00 ] Now, we're going to read in Revelation and chapter 2, and from verse 12, you'll find us on page 1029 of your church Bible.

Revelation chapter 2 and from verse 12.

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 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.

[ 1 : 08 ] So also you have some who hold the teaching of the 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 deceives it.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your Word be our rule, your Spirit our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus our Lord.

Amen. There are certain words which have become taboo in the modern world, did I say it even the modern Christian world.

Holiness is one such word. It conjures up images of holier-than-thou Christians who look down on everybody else, just like the Pharisees did. Obedience is another.

[ 2 : 18 ] It conjures up images of legalistic Christians who have no joy in their lives and never smile. But of them all, repentance may be the most taboo.

No one ever likes to say sorry. You know, we hate it, as we see in our news even at the moment this week, when our politicians have been discovered with their fingers in pies of corruption and deceit, but refuse to apologize.

They hide their sins behind phrases like, I didn't know. I have no recollection of that. Poor judgment.

Or I was economical with the truth. But the one word you never hear from their mouths is, sorry.

Never mind politicians. For Christians, saying sorry isn't a strong point.

You know, when prominent Christian leaders have fallen to sin, I've yet to hear one of them say, sorry. And we can't decide whether they profess repentance because they sinned or because they were caught sinning.

[ 3 : 29 ] But how good are we at saying sorry? If we say sorry little to each other, how much less do we say it to God? Far too few of us take repentance seriously.

As churches, we're so busy perfecting our mission, service, and worship, we fail to lay the solid Christian foundation of repentance and humility.

As Christians, we're so busy pursuing wealth and security and happiness, we've forgotten that true wealth, security, and happiness is found not in this world, but in God.

Now, our fathers in the faith understood the central place of repentance, which is why the Reformation they instituted took firm root and changed our world for the better.

Churches which have experienced the grace of revival have this one thing in common. They're all characterized by deep repentance. Those Christians where we tend to respect the most have this one thing in common.

[ 4 : 41 ] They're familiar with repentance. So why then does repentance, saying sorry to God, play such an insignificant part in our lives as churches and as Christians?

But then, of course, repentance is more than just saying sorry to God. It's more than just admitting that we've been wrong. It's about changing the direction of our lives, and rather than living for ourselves, living for God.

It means that we admit we can no longer do life by ourselves, but we're entirely dependent upon Christ and His strengthening, empowering, and joy-giving grace. If we want to experience the abundant life Jesus promised us and die to give us, repentance must be far more central in our lives than at present it is.

Now, Pergamum was a Roman colony in modern-day western Turkey, a very influential city. At the heart of Pergamum was a mountain on which were placed temples to various pagan gods.

The two most prominent temples were those dedicated to the Greek god Zeus and to the Roman emperor. Pergamum was a very religious city, entirely given over to the worship of pagan gods.

[ 6 : 07 ] In His letter to them, Jesus calls Pergamum Satan's home in verse 13, and where Satan dwells.

For all its superior architecture and its plethora of religious buildings, it was home to Satan. What a pity that rather than sell their vacant buildings to other religions, our national church, the Church of Scotland, does not recognize these other religions for what they really are.

So, the city of Pergamum was quite a difficult environment for the Christian church. And as we see from this letter, Jesus rose to the church in Pergamum here in Revelation 2.

The church had become compromised. Rather than transforming pagan Pergamum, it had become transformed by pagan Pergamum.

And this church, as did every church, needed deep repentance. It was not wholly compromised, however. Jesus says to it, You hold fast my name.

[ 7 : 19 ] You did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you. Even under pressure, the Christian church there stubbornly existed.

We know nothing about Antipas other than that he was probably a victim of some kind of mob violence as opposed to a state-sponsored persecution. In a pluralistic city like Pergamum, Christianity was treated just like any other religion rather than singled out by the state for special treatment.

And in that, the church in Pergamum continued to cling to the name of Jesus. From the outside, things looked good. But not all was as it seemed. For all its outward adherence to the name of Jesus, the church in Pergamum was heavily compromised.

On the outside, it looked good, but on the inside, a spiritual mess. Jesus said, Yet I have a few things against you, verse 14. I have a few things against you.

What a terrifying thought that Jesus could have a few things against us as a church, not on the basis of what we look like, but on the basis of who we are.

[ 8 : 32 ] What a terrifying thought that because of our lack of repentance and doing things God's way, Jesus could have things against us. The Jesus who inspired Paul to write these words, if God be for us, who can be against us, now says that the church in Pergamum, on account of its compromise, I have a few things against you.

He goes on to say in verse 14, There are 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, sacrifice to idols, and practice sexual immorality.

So also, you have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Now, to understand this, we need to go back into the history of the Old Testament. At that time, the Israelites under Moses were journeying through the wilderness.

They're a very powerful people. There are millions of them. And Balaam, the king of Moab, realized that he could not defeat Israel in a battle.

Rather than go to war against Israel, Balaam hired Balak, who was a pagan prophet. And Balak devised a new strategy.

[ 9 : 54 ] Rather than send out Moab's soldiers to fight against the men of Israel, it sent out Moab's prettiest woman, whose role it was to seduce the men of Israel.

So the men of Israel eyed up these pretty women, and they followed their carnal desires and they compromised. They began to listen to their Moabite lovers telling them about the gods of Moab.

And they even began to worship these gods for themselves. They refused to fight against the armies of Moab, not because the armies of Moab were superior, but because they had

compromised.

We also have Jesus' reference here to the Nicolaitans. We've already encountered them in Jesus' letter to the church in Ephesus. The Nicolaitans were a group of false teachers who, because they were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and Jewish mysticism, taught that all that's important in your life is the life of your spirit.

What you do with your body as a Christian, it's not important. You can sleep around, you can drink as much as you like, you can do whatever you like just as long as you protect the life of your spirit on the inside.

[ 11 : 17 ] So, we put these two things together and we begin to understand what Jesus has against the church in Pergamum. Remember, Pergamum is a city filled with pagan religion.

Pagan religion was very different from that of the church. It involved sacrificing food to idols, in this case, Zeus and the Roman Emperor.

It also involved sexual immorality in sync with pagan fertility rites. Christians in the church, rather than standing firm on Christ's standards of love and righteousness, were being seduced to compromise with that religion.

So, they spent the morning in church worshipping God and they spent the evening in one of the pagan temples eating food sacrificed to idols and getting involved in religious orgies.

They did it perhaps because they feared the consequences of being different or they did it because they were tempted by the curse of easy-belivism that as long as you believe in Jesus, you can say, I'm saved, I can live whatever way I want.

[ 12 : 30 ] So, it would seem that there were two groups in this Pergamum church. One group were compromising with pagan religions. The other group stood faithful, did not compromise with these pagan religions, but they tolerated those who did.

There are some who compromised and there are the rest who tolerated the compromisers. And to them both, Jesus says, I have a few things against you.

Jesus' message is this. It's not enough to say that we are not compromising with pagan religions. We must also refuse to tolerate those who do.

Now, this has an obvious application and a not so obvious application. Obviously, obviously, we cannot, we do not, and we must not tolerate a multi-faith approach.

By definition, we do not believe other world religions are true. We do not compromise with them in any way. We preach Christ and Him crucified, not Christ and other religious leaders.

[ 13 : 39 ] We will not allow our building to be used by other religions for worship services, and we'll take a dim view of any among us who profess Christ as their Savior and Lord, worshiping with us on a Sunday morning, but in the afternoon, celebrating Beltane with modern-day pagans.

That's an obvious application of this passage, right? What's not so obvious is the definition of a religion such that we may compromise with it.

The world will never destroy the church from outside by force. The church cannot be destroyed from outside. But what the world will do instead is what Balak and Balaam did to the Israelites.

It will seduce us by placing before our eyes the most attractive features and distracting us from the pure worship of Christ. To use a phrase coined by the Puritans, a fishing illustration, it will show us the bait, but from us it will hide the hook.

The world around us will promise much but deliver nothing but pain, suffering, and death. I'm talking here about the religion we call materialism. Materialism.

[ 15 : 01 ] This religion teaches us that the pursuit of comfort, wealth, pleasure, security, health, relationships, family, belonging, status, and significance are the most important things in life.

We want our children to be happy so we become their slaves. On our way to church this morning, the road out, the Anisland Road was absolutely jam-packed with parked SUVs, kids playing the rugby in the pictures, right?

The question is, are these parents slaves to their children? Probably. We want to make our mark so we become slaves to our career and our work.

We want to enjoy ourselves in life so we become slaves to pleasure. We want to belong so we become slaves to pursuing relationships with all the wrong kinds of people.

We want security so we become slaves to banks who hold our mortgages. We become so engrossed in the world that we forget God made us for Himself and that true satisfaction is found not in living for ourselves but for Him.

[16:16] This religion, the religion of the world, is that of the Nicolaitans and the church is full of it. It hides in respectability. Sorry, can't make it to church this morning.

I'm taking the kids to sport. Sorry, can't commit myself to serving in the church. My work's too busy. Sorry, can't commit myself to Christ right now.

I've got a new girlfriend. We become ineffective and compromised and useless Christians. Balak has won another victory even as his pretty girls have seduced us away from Christ.

And the church is infected with this form of religion in the West, the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Oh, we cloak it with respectability but when we see it the way the Lord does, it entirely changes our response.

We realize that what we need most as the Western church is repentance and renewal. We need to really listen to Christ when He says, I have a few things against you and His call to us through the church in Pergamum in verse 16, therefore, repent.

[17:31] So having challenged us and shown us where we fall short, let me spend the next 10 minutes, sorry, I've changed the direction, next 10 minutes, last 10 minutes of the sermon, stating three things from our text about repentance.

First, repentance is a way of life. Second, repentance is the way from death. And third, repentance is the way to life. Repentance is a way of life, it's the way from death, it's the way to life.

The Western church does not need new strategies, it does not need new plans, it needs radical repentance and what we say of the church, we can equally say of us as individual Christians.

First of all, repentance is a way of life. In verse 16, Jesus does not say, I do wish you would repent or, you know, repentance is good for your health.

He commands the church in Pergamum to repent. The living and exalted Christ who we met in Revelation 1, the Lord whose glory far outshines the sun, the almighty Alpha and Omega commands us.

[18:40] Shall we obey or shall we disobey? And by our lives shall we show that the Lord who was crucified for us and now reigns in power for us is our Lord and our Master, our Savior, our King and our Friend.

In 1517, Martin Luther, the German architect of the European Reformation, nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany.

The first of these 95 statements reads like this, when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, he called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

So the whole Reformation is based upon this one statement, when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent, he called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Repentance is not just a one-off action, it is a lifestyle. Just as we pray every day for our daily bread, so we repent every day. Try and concentrate.

[19:54] It's not going to be easy. Repentance becomes as normal to us as breathing. Remember how Jesus began his public ministry with the words repent because the kingdom of heaven has come near.

And his cousin John the Baptist preached a message of repentance. Repentance is not a one-off action, it's a lifestyle. As our faith in Christ grows, as we realize just how wonderful the gospel is, so does our hatred for our personal sin and the horror we feel at tolerating that sin in our churches.

I'll never forget a conversation I overheard between two older Christians who are now both in heaven. The first was one of the most beautiful Christians I had ever met and he said to the other one, you know, I feel I'm getting more, not less sinful the older I get.

I feel I'm getting more, not less sinful the older I get. The other, who was somewhat of a legalist, replied, I don't. You know, I really do feel I'm getting better as I grow older.

It was the first Christian who grasped the message of Jesus and realized that as his faith in Christ grew, so did his need for personal repentance.

[21:22] To use Luther's words, his entire life had become one of repentance. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray, saying, forgive us our debts. Just as every day we pray for our daily bread, so every day we pray for our forgiveness.

We continually repent of our sin and resolve to reject the Nicolaitan way, Bala, all the seductions of the world, determining rather to go God's way and continually we commit ourselves to Jesus.

Repentance is a way of life. Second, repentance is the way from death. Repentance is at the heart of the healthy Christian's spiritual life.

You must, however, be careful. Taking Christ's grace for granted and living any way we so desire without any reference to Christ's law of love, living like a Nicolaitan is very dangerous.

Jesus begins this letter in verse 12 with the words, I am the one who has the sharp two-edged sword. And immediately our minds are drawn to that text of Scripture in Hebrews which says, for the word of God is living and active sharper than any two-edged sword.

[ 22 : 41 ] I've got no doubt that Jesus' reference here to having the two-edged sword, especially the two-edged sword coming out of his mouth, is a reference to the word of God, the Bible.

But a connected meaning of sharp two-edged sword is in the context of judgment. The two, of course, are linked. Jesus judges using his word.

His word condemns the unrighteous. His word vindicates those who believe in Jesus. And in verse 16, Jesus warns the church that if it does not repent, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

Jesus warns them, I'm coming, and my coming among you will not be in order to bless you, but to make war upon those among you who you tolerate, those who hold that false teaching.

Again, what a terrifying thought for us, that the promise of Jesus is that he shall come among us not to give spiritual life, but to bring spiritual death. You know, every Sunday, we pray in our worship services for Christ to be present with us through the Holy Spirit to bless us.

[ 23 : 56 ] Imagine if Christ was with us not to bless us, but to make war against us. This is what shall result in the individual Christian life if we shall not repent of compromising with the world.

This is what shall result in the church if we refuse to repent of our worldliness and if we tolerate those among us who do. It's a shocking prospect that Christ shall come to us not in blessing, but in judgment.

And sadly, we see too much of that in our own day when churches compromise with the world. Christ comes against them in judgment and they decline and die.

And in their decline, they say, you know, we have a new strategy. The way to win the world is to become more like the world and in so doing, they further seal their fate.

However, we must be careful not to think that we are immune from this need for repentance. We dare not settle for the appearance of gospel faithfulness rather than the reality of a need for a lifestyle of gospel repentance.

[ 25 : 09 ] If ever we should become proud in who we are or what we say or what we look like, Christ will come against us with the sword of His mouth and make war against us. Perhaps as individual Christians, we need to take this warning even more seriously.

Could one of the reasons why you feel so spiritually cold be that you've ignored the spiritual discipline of repentance? Repentance is the way from death.

And then lastly, repentance is the way to life. It's the way to life. A lifestyle of repentance together with our gratitude to Christ for the indescribable grace of forgiveness is the way to true and deep spiritual satisfaction in life.

Turning away from the way of self and turning toward the way of Jesus, the Jesus who said, I have come to give life and life to the fool, is the way to spiritual growth and vitality.

To those who repent and go God's way instead of their own, Jesus makes a promise saying, to the one who conquers, verse 17, 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.

[ 26 : 31 ] During those wilderness journeys of the Israelites in the days of Moses, that time when Balaam hired Balak to seduce the men of Israel, the Israelites were still being continually supplied by manna from heaven, sweet bread which God sent them for forty years.

These Israelite men who had been seduced by the Moabite woman stopped eating manna and started eating Moabite food.

All of which had been previously sacrificed to the idol of the Moabite God. However, the manna God gave to the Israelites during those forty years was but a symbol of how God would supply eternal provision for His people through the Redeemer Jesus Christ.

To those who refused to eat food sacrificed to idols in Purgam, Pergamum, their promised hidden manna, the manna of eternal life, not sweet bread given to them by heaven by which they could sustain their physical lives, but the life of Jesus coursing through their spiritual veins which gives them eternal life.

Would you rather have that which sustains you only through this life but rots, or that which will give you life not just now but forever?

[ 28 : 04 ] Christ offers us the hidden manna. He offers us Himself, His own eternal life to any who will go His way and not their own. I can give you a pound to live on today or a million pounds you can live on for a lifetime.

Christ offers us more than a million enough to sustain us not just for this lifetime but forever. He offers us Himself. He is the hidden manna. And He also offers the repentant Christian a white stone, a white stone.

In the ancient world a white stone was given as an invitation to a banquet or a feast. And Christ gives the conqueror an invite to share in His eternal heavenly banqueting feast.

It's not an earthly feast in the temples of Pergamum devoted as they were to the worship of pagan gods. It's a heavenly feast in the eternal temple of God where we shall eat and drink of the banquet of Christ's love and peace and eternal presence.

There we're going to have a status. There we're going to have a name with which at present we are not familiar because you know the glory of that eternal feast will be unimaginable.

[ 29 : 22 ] Let me conclude. Where are you in your battle with Balak? In what ways do you think you're compromising with the gods of worldliness?

Saying sorry has never been our strong point. Let me challenge all of us. Spend a wee bit of time this afternoon in prayer and don't include anything other than this in your prayer.

don't ask for anything. Don't raise my needs or other people's needs. Just this. Confession and repentance.

We've had a time in confession and repentance praying that God would show you the ways in which you need to say sorry and go his way not yours.

God The gospel of Jesus Christ is that in love if anyone confesses his sin God is faithful and just to forgive our sin. The blood of Jesus Christ shed upon the cross for us is the ground of our forgiveness.

[ 30 : 32 ] Jesus loved us so much and loves us so much that he gave everything for us. Shall we love him as we at least do this for him say sorry to him for our sins and devote ourselves in faith to walking in his way and not ours.

He who is an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. Amen. Let us pray. Lord we worship you for your goodness to us in granting us somewhat of a stop sign today an alarm sign saying it might all be going well in your life but have you repented is repentance a way of life for you.

We confess Lord that so often we become so seduced by the attractions of this world so seduced by its pleasures and its distractions so seduced by our cares that we forget all about you our Lord we pray that you would help us to repent to say sorry and to go in your way because to walk in your way is the way to life and not just not just any kind of life but life to the full now and forevermore we ask these things in Jesus name Amen