

The church in Pergamum

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[0 : 00] The reading is from Numbers chapter 25. While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to war with the daughters of Moab.

These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

And the Lord said to Moses, Take all the chiefs of the people and hang them in the sun before the Lord, that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel.

And Moses said to the judges of Israel, Each of you kill those of his men who have yoked themselves to Baal of Peor. And behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought a Midianite woman to his family, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the people of Israel, while they were weeping in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

When Phinehas, the son of Eliezer, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation, and took a spear in his hand, and went after the man of Israel, into the chamber, and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman, through her belly.

[1 : 29] Thus the plague on the people of Israel was stopped. Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were 24,000. Revelation 2, 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 the teachings 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 teachings 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 receives it.

[2 : 49] Well, good morning. Let me add my welcome to Jake's, and let's pray as we look at this, as we look at chapter 2 of Revelation. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word.

Thank you that it's sharper than a double-edged sword, that it shows us where we need to, where we need correcting, where we need training. So Father, please help us to listen now to your word, and pray that we wouldn't just be hearers of the word, but pray that we would doers of the word.

Amen. Now, what's the biggest threat to the church from within? Now, last Sunday, we heard that the greatest threat to the church in Smyrna was intense persecution and suffering from outside the church.

But what about from within the church? At the start of chapter 2, we heard that the church in Ephesus had lost their first love. They'd lost their love for Jesus.

And more specifically, they'd lost their love for those outside of the church. They'd lost their evangelistic edge. But today, we're going to have a look at the threat from within in the church in Pergamum.

[4 : 01] And Jesus' message to the church in Pergamum is that their greatest danger wasn't persecution from outside, but false teaching from within the church. Pergamum's greatest threat was tolerance to false teachers within the church.

Now, before we dive in, let's just remind ourselves where we're up to in the book of Revelation. So, Jesus' message was given to the apostle John on the island of Patmos. We saw that in chapter 1, verse 9.

And it was to show us what soon must take place. And we've just seen that Jesus is Lord from chapter 1. And we were singing about it just now. And we saw, as Jake introduced at the very beginning of the service, that Jesus is the first and the last.

Jesus is alive forevermore. Jesus owns the keys to death and Hades. There's no doubt. Jesus is the King of kings and the Lord of yours. And yet, evil still exists.

Chapter 12 of Revelation tells us that Satan is furious that Jesus is Lord. And he wages war against the church. So, Jesus' letters to the seven churches, they address these issues that arise from evil still existing, Satan being furious, and Jesus being Lord.

[5 : 22] And these seven letters, they help commend, criticize, and equip churches as we live in this spiritual war zone where we know that Jesus has won the war even though battles still remain.

And today, we're going to look at Christ's commendation and criticism for the church in Pergamon. And we must listen up because this might well be an issue for us at Grace Church. If not now, it might be one in the future.

So, first of all, Christ's commendation, holding fast to Jesus. Christ's commendation, holding fast to Jesus. Now, Jesus, he knows that it's far from easy being a Christian in Pergamon.

He understands the intense pressure that they're facing from all sides. Let's have a look at verse 13. 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 dwelt. Now, Pergamon, it couldn't be further from the gospel.

[6 : 31] And it looks like Satan is king of Pergamon. He's got his throne there, and he seems to have set up his home as well. He dwells there. And it looks like Satan is in charge.

And when we consider the context of Pergamon, that seems to make sense. Pergamon was in what is now Western Turkey. And it was sort of a Las Vegas of its day.

It was wealthy, fashionable, and powerful. And it was this sort of mishmash of different religions. It was full of pagan temples. There was a temple to the Greek goddess Athena.

There was this gigantic temple to Zeus, which overlooked the whole city up from a hilltop. And it looked like Zeus was on his throne, overlooking the city.

And there was even a temple dedicated to the Roman emperor. And the city actually became a center for the worship of the emperor, which is known as the imperial cult. And everyone in Pergamon would have been expected to offer incense to the image of the emperor and to acknowledge that Caesar is Lord.

[7 : 41] It looked like Satan was very much in charge. So this small church in Pergamon, they would have been swimming upstream, fighting this strong, dominant current. And they would have been expected to worship Caesar as Lord.

And if there had been a census in Pergamon and you'd tipped the box Christian, that would have spelled big trouble for you. Christians would have been social outcasts. They would have suffered economically.

And they probably even would have been excluded politically. But Jesus himself, the Lord of the universe, he knows all of this. Have a look at verse 13. I know where you dwell.

So Jesus, he knows the fierce threats that this small bunch of believers faced. And despite all these threats, Jesus commends them. He commends them for their response of living in a pagan culture.

They resisted the dominant culture of the day. He says, verse 13, Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith, even the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

[8 : 49] So the church in Pergamon, they commended for two actions. First of all, they hold fast to Jesus' name. And secondly, they don't deny the faith. And despite this threat of physical torture, of abuse, of even execution, they didn't deny Jesus.

They didn't renounce the faith. And the whole church, they were willing to make a stand. And Jesus, he praises them for their faithfulness under intense pressure. But this, of course, put them on a collision course with the culture of Pergamon.

Antipas, he was killed for being faithful and refusing to deny Jesus. Now, John G. Patton, he's one of my Christian heroes. You might have heard of him.

He was a Scottish missionary in the archipelago of the Pacific Islands, just west of Australia, in the 19th century. And he arrived in the island of Tanner in 1858.

And the inhabitants of Tanner, they were cannibals, and they were occasionally known to eat the flesh of their defeated foes. And despite severe opposition, John G. Patton, he didn't back down.

[9 : 59] He didn't renounce Jesus. Despite numerous attempts on his life, he remained faithful. And let me just read, this is a little extract from his autobiography, which I highly recommend.

Just to give you a taste of what he faced. Here's a short extract. One morning at daybreak, I found my house surrounded by armed men, and a chief intimated that they had assembled to take my life.

Seeing that I was entirely in their hands, I knelt down and gave myself away, body and soul, to the Lord Jesus, for what seemed the last time on earth. Rising, I went out to them and began calmly talking about their unkind treatment of me and contrasting it with all my conduct towards them.

At last, some of the chiefs who had attended the worship rose and said, our conduct has been bad, but now we will fight for you and kill all those who hate you.

Now, what an encouragement for us that down the centuries, Christians have refused to back down. They've refused to deny Jesus, like John G. Patton. And we can also draw parallels between Pergamum in the first century and London in the 21st century.

[11 : 11] There's great motivation for us here. Jesus, he knows exactly what 21st century London is like. He knows the challenges we face. He knows the corporate culture at your company, the quiet hostility in the office, the social rejection for holding views that are countercultural.

He knows what RS lessons are like at school. He knows the pressure of the LGBT plus society at school, university or at work.

Jesus knows where Satan dwells. And Jesus wants to remind Christians around the world that even if we do experience deep suffering and even death like Antipas, it will not be the end.

Jesus proved that he conquered death through his resurrection so that we too can conquer death if we're trusting in Jesus. And that means that we can afford to stand up for Jesus as our eternal future is secure.

Nothing can change the fact that heaven is our home. So Christ's commendation. However, this church and Perth they were far from perfect and they need urgently correcting.

[12 : 25] And that brings us on to our second point. Secondly, Christ's complaint, false teaching leads to moral compromise. Now, Jesus Christ, he needs to urgently address the issue of false teaching in Pergamum.

Now, I wonder what words come to mind when you think of going to the dentist. Now, I personally, I dread going to the dentist. I find it intrusive, expensive, often painful, and it usually involves me getting rebuked for not brushing my teeth properly.

Now, before I go, I have to prepare myself for getting rebuked, for failing to follow instructions again. However, actually, going to the dentist is a good thing.

It may be painful, it may involve us getting rebuked, but actually, it's necessary for our long-term physical health. Now, Jesus had a complaint to the church in Pergamum, and it may be a painful complaint, it may involve us getting rebuked in the short term, but actually, it's necessary for our long-term spiritual health.

And I wonder if you notice that actually this threat says it's an internal one. Let's just zoom in on Jesus' complaint in verses 14 and 15. But I have a few things against you.

[13 : 44] 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 they might eat food, sacrifice to idols, and practice sexual immorality.

So also, you have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. So false teaching is recurring within the church. I wonder if you spotted that, verse 14. Some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam.

It's not the whole church, but it is certainly some. And Jesus says that this false teaching, it's a bit like that in Balaam, in the book of Numbers. So we need to go back to the book of Numbers, which traces the Israelite journey from the desert to the promised land to get our bearings.

And in Numbers chapter 2, we see that the Israelites there under intense pressure from the king of Moab, Balak. And Balak, he hires the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites.

And initially, it looked like Balak's plan had failed. However, actually, it ended up working in a sort of much subtler way. Balaam convinced Moab women to persuade Israelite men to sacrifice food to idols.

[14 : 55] And this probably involved some sort of sexual immorality. This false teaching led to moral compromise. And Numbers 25 summarized this for us quite nicely.

So let's just turn back to that again. It's on page 159. So page 159, Numbers chapter 25.

We'll just read the first three verses. While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.

These invited the people to the sacrifice of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to the Baal appeal, and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

Now following this act of disobedience from the Israelites, God, he acts decisively in judgment, and the unfaithful men are killed. But Jesus' point here is that the heretics in Pergamum are encouraging the same behavior in the church as Balaam encouraged Israel on the edge of the promised land.

[16 : 11] And the issue in Pergamum seems to be that these false teachers, the Nicolaitans, were in their midst, and we know exactly what Jesus thinks of them.

If we just flip back to Revelation chapter 2 again. That's on page 1,236.

And actually the Nicolaitans they're mentioned in the letter to the church at Ephesus. So let's just have a look at chapter 2 verse 6. Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

So Jesus, he pulls no punches. He hates them. Jesus hates this false teaching that leads to moral compromise. But what did the church in Pergamum, what did actually happen?

Well, they hadn't actually given up on the faith, but they no longer stood out from the crowd. They were no longer distinctive. And what was probably happening was the Nicolaitans in Pergamum, they were suggesting to others that it was fine to participate in pagan worship on the side.

[17 : 22] Sacrifices to Zeus were fine if it meant you got a better trade deal. Sex outside of marriage, that's fine. Everyone else is doing it. Sacrifice to the Roman emperor, well, they don't really matter.

the church thought that, well, a little bit of immorality, that's not going to hurt anyone. We're all saved by grace after all. And they perhaps thought that it might help the church in Pergamum fit in with the culture.

They thought it didn't really matter what goes on in our community, but it matters to Jesus. Verse 14, I have a few things against you. And we don't know exactly how compromised these false teachers were, but we do know that this false teaching led to moral compromise.

And Ephesians 5, we won't turn to it, tells us that holiness should never be compromised. Ephesians 5, verse 3, says this, but among you there must be not even a hint of sexual immorality or of any kind of impurity or of greed because these are improper for God's holy people.

Now the problem with the church in Pergamum was the rest of the church they just stood by and watched this happen in their own community. The rest of the church they tolerated this moral compromise.

[18 : 36] They failed to act, they failed to take disciplinary action against the Nicolaitans. And there's much to be learnt from this episode in Pergamum. When in Pergamum, don't live as pagans.

When in London, don't live as Londoners. And I wonder what are the areas we're most in danger of living like everyone else, of fitting in. Now our idols are probably not going to be food sacrificed to physical idols, but it might be materialism or career progression or marriage.

What areas are we most like, are we most in danger of fitting in, of living like the rest of London? So Christ criticism, false teaching leads to moral compromise.

sacrifice. And that begs the question, well, what's the solution? And that brings on to our third and final point. Christ commands, repent and look to the future.

Now Jesus, he says that there's only one solution and it must be dealt with immediately. Verse 16, therefore repent, if not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

[19 : 50] Now Jesus, he lovingly says, repent, turn around, do a 180 degree turn, stop living for Zeus, stop living for sex, turn around and restart living for Jesus.

And notice that it is the whole church that must repent. Jesus says, therefore repent. Those who tolerated the false teaching, they must repent. The false teachers themselves, they must repent.

They must do a 180 degree turn. And if the false teachers, the Nicolaitans, they don't repent, the rest of the church, they must exercise church discipline and exclude them from their church in Pergamum.

Because Jesus knows, well, this issue might spread and affect the rest of the church. And if not, Jesus lovingly warns that he will come to judge at Pergamum.

I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. And these words, they're remarkably like Jesus' words to the church at the very beginning in verse 12.

[20 : 55] Let's just have a look at that. Verse 12. And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, the words of him who has a sharp two-edged sword. Now we know that all these seven letters, they share the same structure.

They start with a description of the victorious risen Jesus from chapter one, which we're talking about at the beginning of our service this morning. And this initial description of the risen victorious Jesus is an antidote to the church's specific problem.

So Jesus' description of himself in verse 12, which we just read, is the same as John's description of Jesus in chapter one, verse 16. Just turn back with me just to chapter one.

So we'll have a look at chapter one, verse 16. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

So this sharp two-edged sword is a sign of Jesus' judgment on the church. And how will Jesus judge? Well, it was as we heard earlier, it will be by his word, his sharp two-edged sword.

[22 : 07] And the only thing that really matters is whether the church at Pergamum is living by God's word or not. They need to repent and turn back to God's word.

Jesus is the one who rules and judges in Pergamum. Satan, it looks like he's in charge, but actually that's simply not true. Jesus' sharp sword will have the final decisive word.

So the solution to the church's false teaching and moral compromise is that they'll be judged, is that they need to know that they'll be judged by Jesus' word one day. Therefore they must repent and turn back to Jesus' words.

Now we must ask ourselves, are we willing to ask each other to repent like some of the church did to the Nicolaitans? Do we watch out for one another? And actually we must.

I must watch out for you and you must watch out for me. And do we love each other enough to speak the truth in love? To one another? Do we have the courage to have potentially tricky conversations?

[23 : 13] Do we know enough about people's lives to know the questions to ask? And it probably won't be possible to have these sorts of conversations with everybody, but your growth group or jam might be a good place to start.

Now I have a group of three friends who I meet up with once a turn and I've known these Christian brothers for well over a decade and we want to help each other grow as Christians. So we spend time catching up, but we also spend time asking each other questions.

And our rule is that no question is off the cards. Any question goes. We ask each other about our marriages, our battle with sin, our evangelism, our ministries, our relationship with Jesus.

No question is too awkward. And I know these are Christian brothers who are not afraid to challenge me. And I'm deeply grateful to them for speaking the truth in love to me.

And when did we last say to a Christian brother or sister, you're in real danger. And actually this is a sign of love towards our brothers and sister. Jesus commands us to do this because sin kills.

[24 : 23] Sin threatens the church, just like it did in Pergamum. Now we've heard that Jesus is loving warning of judgment and now we see Jesus' promises to those who do repent in verse 17.

Do look down with me. He who has an ear to hear, 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'll give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Now just before we look at these promises, I wonder if you notice that all the churches need to hear Christ's commendation and criticism. Verse 17 says churches plural.

And actually if we just look at church number four just below Pergamum, the church at Thyatira, well actually they tolerated a false teacher Jezebel which led to sexual immorality.

So Jesus is saying listen up, this is a danger for all churches. And in verse 17 Christians have a special label, they're called conquerors and Christians or conquerors they're promised two gifts in verse 17.

[25 : 42] Hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it. Now let's have a look at these two gifts. Now first of all the hidden manna, well here we should be thinking back to Exodus when God provided the manna in the desert for his people.

Now eating is a sign of close fellowship and Jesus seems to be saying don't eat food sacrificed to idols. Don't have fellowship with idols. Well actually your true fellowship is with me, King Jesus.

And in John's gospel Jesus says I'm the bread of life. Whoever comes to me shall never hunger. So Jesus wants to remind the church at Pergamum that he sustains them with fellowship until the end.

Jesus will be by their side until the end even though it looks like Satan's in charge. Jesus will sustain them until the very end just like God sustained the Israelites through the desert.

So that's the hidden manna. Secondly the white stone with a new name written on it. Now this new name here probably refers to Isaiah 62 verse 2 and this is where Israel's status was a people but they were without a land and it looked like God had abandoned them but God wanted to tell them that their fortunes would be reversed in the last days and their situation in Isaiah 62 looks remarkably similar to the church at Pergamum who felt like they'd been deserted by God and they were ruled by Satan.

[27 : 22] However Jesus promises that they too like the Israelites in Isaiah 62 will have their fortunes reversed and we're told that they're given a new name and this new name is shown in Revelation 14 verse 1.

We won't turn to it but it tells us that all believers will have God's name and Jesus' name on our foreheads. We will all be known by Jesus so intimately that we are marked with his name.

We are saved, kept and owned by King Jesus and Jesus seems to be saying we need to remember our identity is in Jesus not in fellowship with idols and that will only be shown on the final day when all of us will be marked with Jesus' name.

So to summarize these two gifts the hidden manna and the new name Jesus is saying I will keep you to the end. I will walk alongside you till the end. You'll have fellowship with me and your identity with me is secure.

I will give you a new name. So what's the biggest threat to the church from within? Well it seems to be that Satan's favored attack is using false teachers and we might not even notice these false teachers.

[28 : 41] Now are we on guard against false teachers? will we tolerate those who practice sexual immorality or even promote it? Will we tolerate those who idolize wealth, who idolize their career?

On an individual level will we be willing to challenge one another about sin in our own lives? Will we love each other enough to have these potentially tricky conversations?

Will we love Jesus enough to have these potentially tricky conversations? questions? So what we're going to do now is we're going to have a bit of time in discussion groups just mulling over what we've just heard.

If you just look at your service sheet there's three discussion questions just at the bottom there. And in a minute we'll get into groups of about four or five or six. And there might be a few people sitting a bit further away.

Do draw people into your discussion group. We'd love everyone to be involved. We'll have about five or so minutes of discussion groups. But just before we do that let me pray. Let's bow our heads. Heavenly Father we thank you so much for your word.

[29 : 49] Thank you that it's sharper than a two edged sword. Thanks so much that your word shows us where we are falling short. Where we need to hear Christ's criticism. Father thank you also that it shows us the ways to live our lives.

The ways that are to be commended by Christ. Please help us to take on board what we've just heard. Pray that we would be doers of the word. Pray that we'd be standing fast until the end even though we live in a world that is opposed to you in a culture that is opposed to Jesus.

Please keep us going until the end. Amen.