

Revelation 2:12-17 “To the Church in Pergamum (and Huntsville)”

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Date: 06 September 2026

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! We are continuing in the book of Revelation and on letter number 3 of 7. I want to start by telling you a story. When I was in seminary, my Old Testament professor told us this.

He had been asked along with a handful of other scholars and theologians of the Old Testament. He had been invited out to Hollywood to advise on a movie that was being made.

Actually, it was a cartoon which came out in 1998, The Prince of Egypt. So they were there to advise, kind of listen and say, hey, that wasn't the way it is.

Anyways, the director or somebody who was informing them and asking their thoughts said, look, this will be a cartoon and so there's going to be merchandise.

[1:01] There will be action figures. There will be dolls. There will be T-shirts. And we think that there will probably be some sort of toys for Happy Meals.

And one of the scholars, the theologians, raised his hand and he was serious and he goes, what's a Happy Meal? Hollywood already thinks Christians are weird and out of touch.

That really didn't help much. But how about this? Is it okay as a Christian to know what a Happy Meal is?

Of course. Like, yeah, yeah, yeah, sure. Is it okay for Christians to eat Happy Meals? Yes. I mean, of course. Yeah, sure. Okay. Those are easy.

Is it okay to be so disengaged with a culture that you don't know what a Happy Meal is? Maybe it's a little weird, but that's okay too, right? I mean, who really cares?

[2:04] But maybe the question we want to ask as followers of Jesus is how much can I engage in the cultural or how much can I swim in the cultural waters and not forfeit my soul?

Right? Jesus said, you know, famously, what good is it for a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul? As Christians, how out of touch with the culture do we need to be?

How far do we push back for the health of our souls? I would say maybe even this way. How far back do we need to push from the table of the culture to give us a really good shot at a life without so much regrets?

So if we're not careful, engaging in the cultural accepted and encouraged norms can lead to our greatest regrets in life.

Things like years wasted and obsessing over work. Time thrown away in the pursuit of money. Regrets might be something that may have hurt us morally, relationally, financially, or professionally.

[3:26] I think what we need to know is where the happy meal line is. Where is the happy meal line? Where is the happy meal line so I don't cross over it? What will keep my soul healthy?

Right? And honor God. Where is the happy meal line? In our passage, we're going to see that Jesus in his letter to the church in Pergamum has a few complaints.

A few complaints against his people. The happy meal line has been blurred a little bit there. The pull and influence of the culture and the call of Jesus are clashing.

The church is tolerating teaching that will lead many astray to a lifetime of regrets and much worse. Much worse. I don't know what your regrets are.

If we could go around the room and we could be really honest, there's probably a lot of regrets. If you live long enough, you have regrets. Things you've done. The mess you've made of relationships in your life.

[4:37] What lines have you crossed? But here's the truth. There is forgiveness. There is healing. There's hope. Oh, there's always hope.

In Jesus, there is always hope. And it starts, the hope starts with seeing our need for Jesus. And that's what we will do today.

Let's see our need for Jesus. And if the Holy Spirit can speak through me, we will see Jesus this morning. And that's what we all need.

That's what we all need. So let me just pray before we start reading. Father, take these words. Take everything, Father. Let us see Jesus. Let us see him high and lifted up.

Let us diminish and let Jesus increase in our eyes, our hearts, our minds, our souls. In Christ's name, amen.

[5:31] Amen. So let's start reading. Verse 12. And to the angel of the church of Pergamum, write the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

All right, let me pause there for a second. I think if we're going to take this letter that Jesus writes to a specific church 2,000 years ago and apply it to Huntsville, let's ask this question. What do we need to know about Pergamum that will help us understand this letter and apply it?

Well, let me start by telling you, in 1975, my family and I, we moved to Huntsville. I was in seventh grade. And we came from Maryland, just outside of D.C.

And when you come to the south from living up in the northeast for a good while, it's a different place. I love the south. And we came to Huntsville, and immediately there were some things I noticed.

And I may be not quite right about this, but I promise, maybe it's the Mandela effect. But I'm not kidding. It seemed like every store was closed on Sunday. That was not the way it was in Maryland.

[6:29] And I was like, wow, stores are closed here. And the other thing that I noticed right away was that this guy named Paul Bear Bryant was a god. And if they could have, they would have built the temple to the guy.

I promise. You had to pick. Who are you for? Anyways, okay, I digress. 50 years ago, too. You know, there is a cross on Montecena.

Does everybody know that cross? Have you seen it? 50 years ago, you could see it from more places around Huntsville. I promise. It was very prominent. I guess maybe the trees have grown up pretty tall now.

But you could see it. Immediately, when you come to Huntsville, you knew what was the culture. You could see it. Very Christian. Very football-centered.

Right? And stores were closed. There was that. You felt it. You could feel it. Now, Pergamum. If you were to approach the town of Pergamum, you would see up on the hill a temple to Zeus.

[7:32] And that's what this city is about. Because it's a big temple. And it's overseeing the city. And you would also find that this was the first city to have a temple dedicated to a living emperor.

Right? And if they had football back then, we wouldn't know who would be in that thing. But that's how the city feels. And you feel it.

You know. That's the culture. That's what you're swimming in. Okay? So that's a good sense to know what's going on. Emperor worship. Zeus is the God.

And 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 dwells. I love the opening of that verse. Where Jesus is essentially saying, I know what you're up against.

[8:35] I know what it feels like to have all of this cultural influence on you. I know. He knows. I know what you're up against.

It's relentless. And it's oppressive. You can't escape it. The structures and the statues are a constant reminder. And he says to the people in Pergamum, listen, when the lines are clearly drawn, you guys have done a great job.

You stood up to the overt oppression of, hey, you need to worship the emperor. You need to worship Zeus. You need to get in line with that.

And they stood up against it. When the lines are clearly drawn, when the happy meal line is really clear, they rose to the occasion. But what Jesus says in verse 14, listen.

He said, but I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to be a stumbling block before the sons of Israel so that they might eat

food and sacrifice to idols and practice sexual immorality.

[9:47] So also you have some who hold the teachings of the Nicolaitans. Okay, so on the one hand, Jesus is saying to the people there, when the lines are clearly drawn, you get it.

You're able to respond. But, and he mentions in the letter Balaam and Balak. Here's what you need to know. It happens in the Old Testament in numbers.

Balaam was a person, had a reputation where he gives blessings and curses. And you can hire him to do that. And Balak is the king of Moab.

And he's fearful that Israel is going to do to him and his kingdom what they've been doing to everyone else, defeating them and taking over. So he hires Balaam and says, curse them.

And Balaam tries, but he can't. God won't let him. All right. So he comes up with an alternate plan. Balaam comes up with, tells Balak, here's how you can subdue these people.

[10:47] Do it more subtly. Get them involved in sexual immorality. Get them involved in idol worship. They'll rot from the inside. So that's what his advice was.

And so the Nicolaitans here mentioned, we really don't know who they are. But they follow that pattern. So the concern is they're going to, in Pergamum, this group is going to infiltrate and very subtly begin to pull you down.

My people, you're going to suffer from this if you're not careful. So part of living in Pergamum was if I have a business and I want to do business development, I want to live among these people, I'm constantly trying to figure out where the happy meal line is.

Because it's probably good for my business to go get involved in some sort of temple ritual because it will get me a little further down the road. There's all this stuff that had happened where people could compromise their faith in Pergamum.

And that's the concern. So the Nicolaitans were coming in and go, listen, Zeus isn't a real god. So if you offer food to a real god, it's not really doing anything.

[12:06] So just do it and get along so you can go along and have your life here in Pergamum. That's what's going on. Even, hey, you can go to the temple worship where there's this immorality.

And that's not real. That's not a real god. The emperor is not the real king. And there's this idea of maybe you can fly close enough to the sun without getting burned.

That's what's going on. Now, interestingly enough, Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 10 and 6. Because he looks at and says, look at verse 19 of chapter 10. What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything or that an idol is anything?

No. He's saying, look, these are not real things. But he says this. And this is really important for us to understand this and embrace this and believe this. He said, no, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.

[13:11] I do not want you to be participants with demons. So right there we're starting to learn. But even in a culture, even in 2026, even in Huntsville, Alabama, there are things going on that are supernatural and that go way beyond what we can see.

So we have to be very careful about what we engage in. And that's what Paul is pointing out.

There's something more going on that we can't see. Something supernatural.

Something transcendent. So he says next about sexual immorality, essentially flee it. He says this. He says, flee sexual immorality.

Every other sin a person commits is outside the body. But the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?

You are not your own. For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. See, the question. There are things. There are supernatural things going on.

[14:17] Sex is not just this thing you do physically and that's it. Because the Holy Spirit resides in us, there's something that happens in that relationship.

In the sexual union that is transcendent. And we have to be careful with how we steward that. It's a big attention is being drawn to what cannot be seen.

So the question isn't where's the happy meal line? What can we get close to and that sort of thing? I think the real question is for you and for me is why are you so interested in knowing exactly where the line is?

It's probably now we start to look at our own hearts and we go, okay, what am I approaching a line that I do not need to cross? Because it will lead to a life of regret.

It will ruin the people's lives around me. It will make a mess of everything. It will dishonor God. And I could forfeit my soul, Jesus says. What is it to gain the whole world and you forfeit your soul?

[15:22] There's a lot going on. And so I would say this on a practical level. You need to, in the things in your life that you know are tempting, that you're maybe giving in to some part of the culture that might pull you in.

You need to put up the bowling bumpers. You know what the bowling bumpers are? You take your kids to the bowling alley, right? And I love that the things on either side of the alley are called gutters.

Because if you ever see somebody sort of passed out in the gutter, they've made a mess of their lives, that's sort of the idea of being in a gutter. Or having a gutter mouth. Just not good. So you've got to figure out what are the things I can put up practically that will help me navigate a world that wants to pull me down.

Here's an example. I have a lot of friends. I've lived long enough and I have seen dear friends make a mess of their marriages through sexual sin. Absolute mess.

Absolute mess. One of them, as I was talking to him as he was trying to pick up his life again, he just said, you know, it was just I found myself, you know, sometime between work and home just doing what I wanted to do and pursuing things that were not good for my soul.

[16:36] And so a bowling bumper may be this, and I love this. Sherry and I do this. Hurry home is the statement. It's a hurry home.

You get off work, go home. Just get home. That may be the bumper that you're setting up. You know, it's sort of like you tell your kids, nothing good happens after midnight. That's a good bumper. Now that I'm 63, nothing good happens after 7. You know, I was like, I'm tired. I'm going to go to bed. Those are sort of like, you know, bumpers, bowling bumpers, right?

It could be that you never have a lunch or a coffee alone with a person from the opposite sex.

That's probably a good bumper for most of us.

But here's the thing. If somebody hears about your bowling bumpers and they go, man, that just seems so out of touch. You go, yeah, it kind of is. But I need that.

[17:33] I'm not saying you need to do that. That's the thing about bowling bumpers. Those things that we push back to give us some room so we don't have a life of regret. And just ruin our souls.

Right? And so if somebody says, hey, man, that seems way out of touch. It's almost like not knowing what a happy meal is. And you just go, well, I don't care. I don't care. I'm not telling you to do this.

I know my own heart. I know where the happy meal line is for me. This is what I need. And here's why. Because how we live matters.

It's both physically how we live and supernaturally how we live. They're combined. See, what good is it for you to gain the whole world yet forfeit your soul?

A great passage. There will be later, months from now, maybe years. We'll see. Revelation 21, 27. But nothing unclean will ever enter it. We're talking about new heavens, new earth.

[18:33] Nothing unclean will be there. Nor anyone who does what is detestable or false. There's a lot riding on how we live. But only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

See, we're Presbyterians and we're Reformed. You cannot earn your salvation and you can't lose it. Jesus lived a life you couldn't. Died the death you deserved. But we all have a question. How will I live in light of that truth?

How will I live? Can I live in such a way that my soul isn't eaten away? Where sin, because look, sin doesn't just affect you. It affects everybody around you.

It affects everyone. It can devastate and inflict pain. Pain that you will have to live with and regret.

Therefore, Jesus says, verse 16, repent.

All of life is repentance. And we need to repent a lot. Because we're always asking, well, this line, where's the line? And we need to repent of even wanting to get close to some line that we know is probably not good for us.

[19:40] We need to back off and repent. Repent. Repenting is turning from the sin that is enticing you or that you've even given into and turning towards Jesus.

Turning towards Jesus. Hopefully, maybe at this point, I've been trying to build a case that there are supernatural things going on.

Again, it's just not sex. The Holy Spirit lives in us. Because you're in union. And you should only be in union with the one you've married and committed to, right?

There are all kinds of idols in the world that we can give our hearts to. And it could be work. All those sort of things. But there's something supernatural going on that we can't forget.

I love how every one of these letters that are written in Revelation start with, you know, to the angel of the church of. Now, some commentators go, well, it's not really an angel.

[20 : 37] It might be the pastor of that church. For my soul, I need to believe and understand it that there is a church. There is an angel that is assigned to Southwood.

It gets my mind right. There's something more than just what I can see. There is an angel assigned to Southwood. Wow.

Wow. There's something supernatural going on in how I live my life. It's mysterious. It's wonderful. There's more than meets the eye. It's humbling.

It's emboldening to think. There's more than just stuff. Right? So in Pergamum, Caesar is not God. Zeus isn't real. But it's a big deal how you interact with that. Because demons are involved. There's a spirit world. Something that is not good for your soul, you need to push back from.

[21 : 36] Sex isn't just an activity. It only happens in the physical realm. It's a mystical union that takes place. So here's the question. Why settle for boring happy meals? Why settle for boring happy meals in this world when we were designed to dine with Jesus and feast on every word that comes from his mouth?

That's what we were designed to do, to know him. And as I sort of wrap this up, which means it's another 20 minutes. I don't know. No, as I wrap this up. I love church architecture.

It's my background. It's what I did for a lot of years professionally. And the thing about church architecture, and by the way, fantastic. I'm glad the people that raised money for this did at least this.

It's nice. But see, church architecture used to have deep meaning. It did something for us and reminded us of some things.

It told a different story. The architecture told a different story than the story the world is telling and the culture is telling. It helped create a different culture than the world's culture.

[22 : 52] And Gothic architecture is a great example. Gothic architecture is one of the easier things to recognize. You know, they're all over Europe. And they're tall. They have these what are called flying buttresses.

But the engineering allowed the architects and the artists and stuff to go taller. Okay? To go way much taller than it was before. The walls didn't have to be so thick.

They could be thin. You could put more windows. Gothic architecture is so recognizable. It has sort of the arched point. Right? So it's very recognizable.

No, those aren't Gothic arches. And as you approach the city, you would see the church building. And it began to tell you something about who was the king of that realm.

Right? And as you approach that building, as you got to the entrance, above the arch was typically, typically above it was the last judgment.

[23 : 52] All these intricate carvings of the last judgment. Can you imagine entering a church and it's like, last judgment is up there. Right? And there were gargoyles. You know what gargoyles are?

These really ugly looking beings. It's kind of scary. And that's where the water spouts, you know, water would drain off that way. But what that's doing is it's saying, out in the world, it's an oppressive, difficult place.

A place where Satan is fighting for your soul. Right? And what was interesting about the architecture was that once you entered in through those doors, it was understood that you were entering into a ship.

It was a ship that you're becoming part of and that you would sail to the new heavens, new earth. And all of the architecture, as it went up, they turned into these arches and they looked like trees. Much of the carving around was made up of like leaves and foliage. And, you know, just it looked like you were in a garden. Like the Garden of Eden.

[24 : 59] Because the new heavens and new earth is the full realization of the garden. And so it's a constant reminder about that. In fact, this part of the church was called a nave.

And that's where we get navy. And so the church was a ship that was going to carry you to the promised land. And it was where heaven and earth met.

Where heaven and earth met. It's a constant reminder. There's safety here. It's bad out there. You know, be careful where you draw the happy meal line out there.

And look at this. That is called a rose window. It's also called a Catherine wheel. Catherine, St. Catherine of Alexandria was tortured on a wheel.

They put her on a wheel and they tortured her to recant and her faith. But she was eventually martyred. But sometimes it's called a Catherine wheel. Sometimes it's a rose window.

[25:59] But I want you to look. And stained glass is a type of architecture or type of art that is lit from behind. And so when you look at the lamb that was slain, light is coming from behind.

And Jesus is the light of the world. It's telling you a story. It's telling you the true story that pales in comparison to the crummy happy meal story that the world is giving us.

Later in Revelation 13.8, unbelievers are called earth dwellers. It's there in the passage where it just says, and all who dwell on earth.

When you think that Southwood has an angel assigned to it, it reminds you, I'm not just an earth dweller. I'm a citizen of heaven.

And I'm connected to what God's doing. The Holy Spirit lives in me. I'm not my own. You and I live an enchanted life. It's full of transcendence.

[27:03] It's full of God's beauty. The Holy Spirit resides in me. The victory is won. There's so many great things that are going on that the world wants us to settle for happy meals.

Don't. Let me finish with verse 17. 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 hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it. So all the letters end with, and to those who have overcome, or to those who have conquered, well, here's what we do know. Jesus has conquered our foe.

The sins have been covered. He took the wrath of the Father fully. My sins, debt has been paid, and that's true. He's conquered. That's true. But the question is, we still live here, and we live in Pergamum, and we live in wherever, right?

How do I join the Holy Spirit in conquering the sin in my life? How do I make sure I'm not getting too close to the Happy Meal line?

[28:16] How do I live in such a way with less regrets and in a way that is honoring and good for my soul is the question. And so the answer is in verse 17.

First thing, eat the manna. The manna is referenced to the Exodus, right? When the Israelites were fed with the bread from heaven.

Who's the bread? Class, Jesus, the bread of life. And we're to eat every word that comes from his mouth.

So open scripture. Know scripture. That's how the Father has revealed his Son is through scripture. Eat it. Know it. Hide it in your heart.

Sit with Jesus, the word, the bread of life. Sit with him. Listen to him. Pray to him. Walk with him. Practice his presence. That's eating the manna. We also, because your name is written in the Lamb's book of life, I mean, that should thrill your soul.

[29:25] And here's one way to maybe think about it. When it says in here that there is a new name written on a white stone. Here's a way to think about it. When people were competing in races at that time or some sort of competition, if you won, you got a white stone with your name written on it.

And that white stone was your passage to the banquet, the celebratory banquet that was later. And you could go to that celebratory banquet and enjoy the meal.

And right now, then, hopefully you're connecting the dots. Our names. This secret new name that only, you know, Jesus has for us.

And we'll learn what that is. Whatever that name is written on the stone. And we get to go to the marriage supper of the Lamb. We get to go be part of this beautiful new heavens, new earth.

And because Jesus has won for us. Now, here's how to apply it. Seriously, we're almost done. I love this illustration. And in 2010, I was able to get a new illustration on how to think about this.

[30:38] But in 2010, at the Winter Olympics, there was a competition. Sean White. Anybody know who Sean White was? Then he had his big red hair. And he was a snowboarder.

And in 2010, at the Winter Olympics, there was a competition in the halfpipe deal. And everybody that was competing on that last day got two runs through it.

So the first run, you're trying to get the best score over two runs. So everybody did their first run through it. Sean White was in first place. And everybody else was not.

They were like after him. So the next second run, all those people that were not in first place, they went to try to better that score that Sean White had.

None of them did. Which means Sean White won. And that means that he really didn't have to go through the halfpipe. But he did just to do it. He already won.

[31:38] And he got to skate. He got to snowboard. Just set free. Just absolutely set free. If you go and watch it on YouTube, he's just flying through the air. Doing the McTwist or whatever.

All the crazy names they have. This is a guy that was set free to just snowboard. And I'm telling you, if your name is written on the white stone, Jesus has competed for you.

He's already been judged by you. It's his score you get. And if you're going to live this life, how are you going to snowboard? How are you going to live, man? How are you going to live? Because we are people who have nothing to prove or protect.

Look at Revelation 19.9. Write this. Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. You and I are blessed. How are you going to snowboard? How are you going to live?

Are you always going to be wondering, how close can I get to this sin? Where's the happy meal line? No. Man. Oh, man. You have everything.

[32:38] You have nothing to lose by giving up everything. You have nothing to lose. How are you going to snowboard? Nothing to prove, protect, or lose. So let me close with this, really.

I think maybe the scholar, you know, the Old Testament scholar who raised his hand and said, what's a happy meal? I think he was on to something. You and I will miss out on nothing if we give up everything.

I don't know what your happy meal is, the thing that you want. What's going to make you happy other than Jesus? Nothing. Zero. Nothing. Nothing. If we push back from the cultural table, just push back and say, I'm not going to eat from this table because there's a table that awaits.

And I have been set free. So I don't have to do any of this. I won't wonder where the happy meal line is. I don't care. I'm pushing back. See, to know Jesus is everything.

So is there any meal, let me just ask you, is there any meal that will be happier than the marriage supper of the Lamb?

[33:55] No. So feast on that. Let's all feast on that. Let's feast on Jesus until we're full and we'll never be full. We'll just keep going and going.

Let's pray. Father, help us navigate this world. Help us navigate all the things that would pull us down.

In this room, I am certain there's a lot of regret. But, Father, invade the soul that's feeling regret and give him a glimpse of your forgiveness, your love, your joy, your peace, what the marriage supper of the Lamb was because you paid for all of their regrets.

And let there be healing. Let there be hope. Let them see Jesus. Let all of us see Jesus and move heaven and earth, every stinking happy meal, just move it out of the way and say, I just want Jesus. I just want you. In Christ's name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.