

Revelation 2:12-17

Hi Fort George, It's good to be back. I was here in February 2018, and at that time, I was working overnight shifts at the Union Gospel Mission homeless shelter, so if I'm going to be honest with you, I hardly remember the entire weekend. My body was jetlagged and so, so tired. I remember being in Spencer's house, and falling asleep when a bunch of people decided they wanted to go ATV'ing. I woke up four hours later when they returned, so I hardly got to have any fun. But I got to spend time with my friend Spencer, and I got to share the word with you, so it all came out in the wash. This time I came out to attend Spencer's wedding, and MC the reception last night, and then Spencer asked me to preach. So here I am, so happy to be back and share the word with you.

We are going to look at a section in Revelation. And though Revelation is often seen as the most confusing book in the Bible, I say it may very well be the most relevant - as far as looking at how to live as a Christian goes. We tie so much end times apocolype stuff to this book, and say that it is looking forward to the future, and it is. But when we look at it in it's socio-political context, we begin to realize that it has a lot more to say to us today. And honestly, that's a scary thing, because it means that we will probably have to make some changes in our lives. You have been doing a series called "The Son and His Churches," And you've been looking at the seven Churches to which Jesus speaks in these first chapters of Revelation. We have already seen Jesus, speaking to John who is in exile on the Island of Patmos, and John is writing these down as a letter to send these churches. Jesus has come in glory, and wants his people to listen. "Blessed is the one who reads aloud these words of prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" Writes John.

You've already looked at the first two churches, in Ephesus and Smyrna, and you know what to expect here. Jesus is going to say something to the churches, and it includes an exhortation, and rebuke, with the exception of the Church in Smyrna, who had only done good.

Today, we are looking at the church in Pergamum. Pergamum was a city full of idolatry - worshipping Caesar in the cult of the state. And this is really going to come to the forefront as we engage with this passage today. And what we are going to see is Jesus standing in stark contrast to Caesar, as a very different king than the state has to offer, and that following Jesus for the Church in Pergamum means rejecting Caesar, even to the point of death, because this has already happened in their midst. If they are to be faithful to Jesus instead of the King in Pergamum, Caesar, then they will face persecution and death. They do this because the Kingdom they belong to is not Rome - it is the Kingdom of God that they are to bear witness to. And just as Jesus bore witness to the Kingdom of God and died for it, so we should expect the same. Now we are going to start reading the scriptures, but before that, lets pray

[pray]

Now please stand with me as you are able for the reading of God's word.

[Read Revelation 2:12-17]

This is the word of the Lord

The Speaker

Jesus comes in pretty hot here. For Ephesus and Smyrna, these words came from "The one who holds the seven lampstands." and "The one who is the first and the last." But for Pergamum, it's different. He begins as "the one who has the sharp, double edged sword." That sounds pretty severe, and it seems like Jesus has something to say here that mirrors this kind of severity. So what is this double-edged sword all about?

To the church in Pergamum, the sword represented the death penalty, and Pergamum was one of the few cities that was given the right to capital punishment. To the Pergamum Christians, the sword was wielded by the state over and against anyone who dissented. This was their daily reality - living in fear under the sword of the state. Jesus, who is speaking to the Church right now, stands in stark contrast to that. By beginning as the one who holds the sharp double edged sword, he is saying "Guys, I have a sword too, and I am much stronger than the regime you are under. He is saying "My sword is my words, and whoever hears and obeys my word belongs to me." To hear and obey Jesus' words are to commit yourself to the protection of His sword, while putting yourself in danger against the sword of the empire.

The City where Satan has his Throne

You think coming with his sword would be strong enough, but Jesus continues to come on Stronger. "I know where you live! Where Satan has his throne." So he has come with the sword and now is saying that Satan rules over this very city. What could this mean? Why would he say this? There is not only one reason for this, but many. First, there is a *throne-like* altar to the greek god Zeus at the city's peak. When the Church in Pergamum hears that Satan is on his throne, this is the throne they will be thinking of. Second, there was a temple dedicated to the god of healing, Asklepios, who was represented by a giant snake. Now the Christians in Pergamum will likely connect "Satan" to this snake, as Satan is depicted as a snake in the garden of Eden. Third, there were THREE temples dedicated to the cult of the state here, each to a different ruler, or Caesar. In Rome, Caesars and emperors were worshipped as gods, and called the sons of god. Does this sound familiar? That's what we Christians call Jesus. Jesus is the Son of the living God.

Here's the thing - Rome didn't copy that from us. No, Jesus copied that from Rome. The difference is that Jesus was telling the truth. This is one reason why the ministry of Jesus

was so subversive, and stood so strongly against the empire of Rome. Christians called Jesus the “son of God.” and a common mantra in the early church was “Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not.” They say this not because they’re state dissenters - though many of them certainly are. They say this because Jesus is their King, and they belong to a different Kingdom than Caesar belongs to. To call Jesus the Son of God was to give loyalty to a different King. It is Christians saying to the empire “You’re not my King, because you’re not the true son of God. Jesus is my King, because Jesus is God’s one and only son.” Satan is on his throne, and Caesar rules with an iron fist. The snake of the empire has taken the place of God. Now Christians need to choose who they will worship and serve: A false ruler, or their true king?

BUT there is some good news that Jesus gives. Even though there is a strong religion of the state, and even though the state has the power to kill dissenters, many in the church have remained faithful to Jesus! Their faithfulness though, was at great cost. Jesus tells the Church about a man named Antipas who was put to death in this city where Satan lives. We know little else about this Antipas, but from what Jesus has told us, Caesar, who is on Satan’s throne, put Antipas to death because of his loyalty to another King. Tradition says that Antipas was killed by being burned alive inside a giant bronze bull. This is what the Church in Pergamum can expect from following Jesus.

And if they aren’t put to death for not participating in the state religion, then they will certainly be ostracised from society, barred from trade, and even have property confiscated from them.

Now, there many who stayed faithful to Jesus in this church - who followed the example of Antipas and refused to deny Christ even under intense and deadly persecution. But, as can be expected, not everybody wants to die young. There is compromise in this church, and some have found another way to be Christian - trying to be loyal to both Caesar and Jesus. But what

they are really doing is shivering in fear under the sword of the state, and ignoring the sword that Jesus wields.

Church persecution

Okay, that was a lot to take in - so lets take a step back and look inwards a little bit. An easy landing point we can hang out at here is that of persecution. We don't live in a culture, society, or country where we are under threat of ostracization or death because of our faith. There are certainly people who don't like Christianity, and there are certainly some social barriers we face because we are Christian, but for the most part, we can live quite well and calmly without the stress of persecution.

But, is this a good thing? In a world where Christians lives look largely the same as that of the people in regular society, what is there that sets our lives apart? What is it about us that tells people "These are Christians. You can tell because of what they do, what they abstain from, and how they live."? I'm not confident there is very much.

There are many places in the world where This is a daily reality. It's a pretty hard and fast fact that Christians are the most persecuted minority group in the world. All over the world, Christians are losing their jobs for their faith, they're families are being split apart because of their faith, and many are dying for their faith. A May 2019 report from the United Nations says that global Christian persecution is at "near genocide levels." Now, we don't feel that over here, and frankly, I'm glad about it. But the fact of the matter is, if someone is willing to remain Christian even though they know they could be ostracised, unemployed, or killed because of it, there is no argument to be made against the sincerity of their faith. You KNOW that person is a Christian.

But our society is so affected by something called "Christendom." "Christendom" is the word used to describe a society that was put in place by the Church. North America and

Europe were Christendom places - their governments and institutions were run for so long by the Church. And while we are now "post christendom cultures," we still see the remnants of it. For example, while Canada has separation of Church and State, England still has a state church, the church of England - go figure - and even sets aside seats in their senate, called the house of Lords, for Church Bishops!

With this Christendom in mind, I think it makes sense that we have a hard time discerning what is Christian and what is not. What we have always thought was following Jesus is historically what our society told us was being Christian - but too often that just meant church attendance, financial giving, and respect for clergy. And this society that the church was so deeply ingrained in taught us the teachings of accumulating wealth for ourselves, of self-preservation and individual liberty, Of choosing ourselves over and against anything else, and this stands in stark contrast to the teachings of Christ! We have made a compromise and called it Christian. This is similar to what is happening to the church in pergamum. In Pergamum, some were following the cult of the state. Today, we are following the cult of the self. We have fallen astray by false teachings, and we need to repent.

WHich leads us back to Pergamum. Jesus tells them that they are following the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. These teachings have slithered into the church like a snake, and many have started believing the lies that look so attractive, but are so far from the truth.

Lets spend a little bit of time looking at the story of Balaam, to get a firmer grip on what is going on here at Pergamum.

The Story of Balaam

Now Balaam is the prototypical false prophet in scripture. That is why this passage says that the Pergamum church is following Balaam - they are following the teachings of a False

Prophet. But when we look at the story of Balaam, that's not the first thing we see. I for one, read the story of Balaam just a few weeks ago in my personal reading, and I didn't catch the bit where he's a false prophet. The initial story told about Balaam in numbers is one that seems to paint him as a good guy, who followed the call of God. So lets take a look at it.

The Story of Balaam begins in Numbers 22, and there are three full chapters dedicated to him. You can turn in your Bibles to there to follow along, but I am just going to give a summary of the story. This story begins with Israel, who have camped out next to Moab. Israel came out of slavery in Egypt, and are making their way to the promised land. The King of Moab, named Balak saw all that Israel had done at war, and he did not want them to eat up all their land, food and resources, so he called for a prophet named Balaam.

To be clear, Balaam was not a follower of Yahweh, neither was he a prophet of the God of Israel. He was a magician, a diviner, a sorceror, called upon to curse Israel. Balak sends his officials to call on Balaam saying "A people have come out of Egypt. Put a curse on them, they are too powerful for me. For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed." Balak said this to him, and wanted to give Balaam his payment - "the divining fee." as it is called.

What is interesting here is that even though Balaam doesn't worship the God of Israel, he still waits for the God of Israel's answer - maybe he is inquiring with the God of the people he is supposed to curse intentionally - because that's the God Israel follows, and so it's best to get that God's advice. And God says to Balaam "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on these people, because they are blessed." (Num 22:12) So Balaam tells the King's messengers to go away, because of what God had told him. Balak sweetens the deal, and offers Balaam more money. Balaam refuses and says "I could not do anything great or small apart from the

command of the Lord my God.” But then God tells Balaam to go along for the ride - but to do only what God tells him to.

As Balaam and Balak’s messengers are making their way to Moab, God stops them in a strange way - God stops Balaam’s donkey, and the donkey talks. Balaam is so frustrated that his donkey has stopped, that he starts beating his donkey, who then speaks to him in perfect Hebrew: “What have I done to make you beat me these three times?!” Balaam responds as if this were a normal conversation, as one usually does when you hear a donkey talk. And Balaam’s eyes were opened, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in his way, holding a sword. This angel says again to Balaam “Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you.” So Balaam goes obediently on.

When Balaam meets King Balak, he is told again to curse Israel, and again, God tells Balaam not to. This happens three times, and Balaam continues to refuse, because he can only speak the words that God puts in his mouth. “I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them three times!!!” says Balak “I would reward you handsomely, but the *Lord has stopped you from being rewarded!*”

Now, when I read this passage, I thought “Wow, Balaam is such a great guy! He only speaks what the Lord tells him!” a couple days after reading this passage, in a phone call to a friend who is a pastor, I was talking about this story, and how I felt the spirit speak to me through it. She responded to me “But Graham, Balaam isn’t a good guy. In the rest of scripture, he is the prime example of a false prophet. He is looking to make a quick buck, and that’s why he went with Balak’s officials.” I was confused at that, because what stuck out to me was how Balaam could only speak the words that God told him. But as I continued to read, things became a little bit more clear.

See, while this initial story of Balaam might be nice, the continuing story of Balaam is not. In Numbers 31, we read that Balaam lured the Israelites into sexual sin and eating food offered to idols. In Jude, and 2 Peter, Balaam is used as an example, warning the Church against smooth talkers that seem at first like they're doing the right thing, but later turn into con artists and lead people astray.

See, Balaam lead me astray with his smooth talk when I read the story just a few weeks ago. Yes, when Balaam was first asked to curse Israel, he said no, at God's command. But when he is offered even more money to do so, he leads Balak's officials astray by basically telling them "Let me see if God has changed his mind." Leading Balak's officials to think it was more of a cash issue than an ethics issue. God DOES give Balaam permission to go with Balak's officials, but in doing so, he is saying to Balaam "I am stooping down to your level and letting you go. You want to make a quick buck, so go and learn the hard way that you will not make it. My mind is not changing, and no matter what, you will not curse Israel." As Balaam follows the men, God stops his donkey, and gives balaam the chance to end it, and turn around, but he goes on his way. He then leads King Balak on by humouring his request to curse Israel not once, but THREE times. He's in it for the money, but God is in it for his people, and he will not let them be cursed.

In short, Balaam continues to betray God for money. This is why Balaam is often called the "Judas of the Old Testament."

So this is what is happening to the Church in Pergamum. They are following teachings of a smooth talker - who has lead them astray, but they are making it look like they are following God. They have fallen into sexual sin, they are worshipping Caesar, they are eating food sacrificed to idols, and they think it's okay for a Christian to do. They're not necessarily doing

these things for a quick buck, but they're doing it to avoid persecution. This is what it means when it is said that they are following the teachings of Balaam.

Now, I didn't want to have to do this, But it's election day on Saturday, so I think it's pretty unavoidable. And with all this talk of the State with the church in Pergamum, I think it makes sense to do this. So here goes.

Speaking of Balaam, can you think of any other smooth talkers that are trying to convince you of their ways and pull you to their side? I can think of at least five people. Yes, we have the five major party leaders who are all trying to lure you over to their side with promises of endless economic growth if only you vote for them. They're providing policies that will lead to prosperity and different ways to live. But here's the thing: No matter how enticing their campaigns are, Christians, they will never be your leader. They may lead the government that sets the policies that affect your taxes, healthcare, and bank accounts, but they do not rule over your lives, hearts, or minds. Elizabeth May, Maxime Bernier, Jagmeet Singh, Andrew Scheer, and Justin Trudeau are all trying for your vote so that they can rule over a Kingdom that you do not belong to. Christians, you belong to Christ, and you are a citizen of Jesus' Kingdom. You live and love in ways that stand in stark contrast to the ways the world lives and loves.

They are trying to form a government, and asking for your loyalty. But we are the church, and our loyalty is to Jesus. While government takes from us and distributes as they see fit, Christians, we take from ourselves and give to the poor and each other for the betterment of our communities, both inside and outside the Church. And yes, we give to caesar what is caesar's, we can give him back his money. We must respect our state authorities, but our final authority is Jesus, and often, even in this post-christendom culture, following Jesus means going back on the grain of a culture that cares only for the individual - and pointing us to a better

way to live. A way that serves the poor, a way that cares for each other in love, a way that refuses violence and calls for peace. The way of Jesus.

And these leaders going for office are not trying to persecute anybody. So Christians, be careful. You don't want to confuse the flow of society with faithfulness to Christ.

So as I close, let me remind you about who and what you are being faithful to - the person of Jesus Christ, who has good news to share. Christians, you have been saved by a God who loves you, even when you hated him. You have been created by a God whose hands were nailed to the cross because of our sinfulness. You have been called a friend by a God who you called your enemy. You have been given life by a God who rose from the Grave, and calls us to love him deeper and more fully. Christians, you have been called to be Christians, to follow the Jesus who changes everything, and promises to heal this world fully when he comes again in glory, and we will live forever with him. This is what we read in revelation, and this is what we can look forward to.

Amen.