

MESSAGE NOTES
Revelation Unveiled-- Part 6
“Pergamum – The Compromising Church”
Revelation 2:12-17

Introduction: Certain kinds of work demand a higher “nerve quotient” than other kinds; a higher degree of determination. Maybe it will surprise you to hear me say that living the Christian life and doing the work of God in the church can be nerve-intensive and take some determination as well. For example, if Christians live the Christian life without determination to do the things we talked about a few weeks ago when we looked at Jesus’ words in Revelation 2 to the church at Ephesus – the spiritual practices and disciplines that will keep us in a vital first-love relationship with God – we will find ourselves drifting away from God and getting caught up in the cares of the world. If followers of Jesus drift and lose our nerve as we live and minister in a culture which is becoming increasingly hostile to people who are living their faith, there is a good chance the church can become a “religious social club” instead of an alive and vital church who are impacting people and our community for Jesus.

It takes nerve and determination to build a church and keep a church on a God glorifying path over a long period of time. Church historians can point to examples of churches over the years who lost their nerve and as a result, the church declined as a Godly spiritual force in their community and world.

Today we are looking at the second message we are teaching on the church at Pergamum where there were some people in the church who lost their determination to live all out for Jesus and began to make compromises as they lived their Christian life. There were also people who, when that happened, lost their nerve to confront in love, people who were compromising their faith. As a result, it was threatening the witness and vitality, and even the existence of their church.

As we saw last week, Pergamum had lots going on that led Jesus to say in verses 12-13 that this city, which was the Washington D.C. of that area in the Roman Empire, was the city where Satan lives and has his throne.

PERGAMUM WAS:

- A major center of emperor worship and the location of the first temple built devoted to the worship of a Roman Emperor who claimed to be god.
- The place where the proconsul of the province of Asia had what was called *The Right of the Sword*, and so Christians were tried there and sentenced to death. It was a place of intense persecution of Christians.
- A major center of pagan worship of mythological Greek and Roman gods and the location of The Great Altar for sacrifices to Zeus who the people thought of as the god of gods and worshipped as the god who is the creator and sustainer of the universe.
- A major sanctuary dedicated to the healing god Asclepius Soter (Saviour) and the god people believed controls healing.
- A sanctuary for the worship of the Egyptian god of healing, Serapis, as Egyptian doctors were there since it was the location of the largest medical center in the world – The Asklepeion.
- The place where people had temples devoted to the worship of the mythological goddess, Demeter, the goddess of Groceries who people believed was responsible for bringing the grain out of the earth, AND Dionysus, the mythological god of wine, party, and happiness who they believed offered 3 things: Happiness in life; Being one with god which they also called being in the spirit; and Eternal life after they died.

So much of what is happening in Pergamum is a counterfeit of Jesus that takes the credit away from God. And while Jesus commends them for remaining true to their faith in Him, not everyone was faithful as he is concerned about the compromises some of them were making as they lived a casual Christian life. **Read Revelation 2:14-15...**

The Nicolaitans: Jesus connects the Nicolaitans with God’s people in the Old Testament because they *hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality*. Jesus is referring to the story in Numbers 22-25. The word Balaam is made up of 2 Hebrew words, *Bella* and *Am*, which means to conquer or subdue the people. The word, Nicolaitan, comes from 2 Greek words, *Nico* and *Laos* which also means to conquer or subdue the people.

Jesus is saying that Balaam got God’s people to sin by eating meat sacrificed to false gods and committing sexual immorality. Now the Nicolaitans are doing the same thing.

What was happening in Pergamum is that the various workers Guilds for each of the professions in industry (we would call them Workers’ Unions) had what is called Triclinium Feasts where the members of the Guild were the only ones

allowed. A triclinium feast was an ancient Roman banquet or dinner party held in a specialized dining room called a Triclinium. The name comes from the Greek word *triklinion*, meaning "three-couch room".

These gatherings which were part of Roman life and would last from late afternoon well into the night. The room was designed around three wide, cushioned couches arranged in a U-shape around a central dining table. The fourth side of the layout was always left completely open so enslaved servants could easily bring food and pour wine. Participants did not sit on chairs; but instead reclined on their left sides, resting their left elbows on cushions and using their right hands to eat. Reclining was a powerful cultural marker of freedom and luxury. Enslaved workers and lower-class citizens in these Roman feasts were required to stand or sit while eating.

Servers would walk in circles and serve people reclining and as the night went on the entertainment became more promiscuous. People would indulge and gorge themselves on meat and drink and then purge themselves two or three times a night to be able to eat and drink more. Later in the evening, slaves would be brought in for an orgy that would go on into the night. The meat being served was sacrificed on the altars to the mythological gods. After the priests got their share, the rest would be sold in the market or be used for these Guild Feasts.

Hopefully this helps us understand that when the Bible talks about not eating meat offered to idols, it could be talking about these Guild Feasts where there is gorging and heavy drinking happening, and where there are no sexual ethics as slaves are used sexually. This is why Jesus says what he does to the church in Pergamum as some in the church are participating in these feasts so they can remain part of the Guild for the sake of their livelihood. They were compromising their faithfulness to Jesus and living like the world lived to safeguard their livelihood and possibly even their life so they would not be put to death as a follower of Jesus.

What about us? As we hear Jesus' words to the church at Pergamum, how are we doing when it comes to living our life as a follower of Jesus in our culture? Do we live a casual Christian life where we compromise when it is more convenient to do so than to live Jesus' way? Do you and I follow the Christ of Culture or the Christ of Scripture?

Every one of us has what the Bible calls in the Greek language, *epithumia*, which translates to "strong desire," "craving," or "passionate longing". Derived from the prefix *epi* ("upon") and *thumos* ("soul" or "passion"), it literally means setting your heart or mind intensely upon something. Because it refers to a powerful urge, its exact meaning depends on context and it can be a natural, legitimate, or wholesome longing, such as passion for success, love, or a noble goal. But it can also be translated as it most often is in the Bible as "lust" or "covetousness" or a sinful craving.

In verse 16, Jesus tells the church in Pergamum and us as well: *"Repent therefore!"* Repent from living a casual and compromised Christian life. Repent from losing your nerve in confronting compromised living in your own life and in the lives of others in the Christian family. Repent! Change your mind and turn around and go in the other direction which is what the word repent literally means. He says if you don't, *"I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth."* That sword is the power of God enacted by speaking a word.

When we repent as followers of Jesus after compromising, falling into sin, and looking more like the world, there is forgiveness, grace and mercy through God's love available to us, and the promise Jesus makes to the Christians in Pergamum is ours as well. **Read verse 17....**

The hidden manna is a reference to the honey-flavored bread that God fed the Israelites with during their 40 years of wandering in the desert after being freed from slavery in Egypt. In John 6:48-51 Jesus talks about this and calls himself the bread of life and says that if we will feed on him (in other words if we will put our faith in him, live in relationship with him each day, and feed on the Word of God) he will sustain us spiritually and we will receive all the benefits of a relationship with him to help us live for Jesus in a world where it is becoming increasingly more difficult to live as his follower.

The white stone with a new name written on it that will be known only to us represents:

1. The custom that took place in the judicial system of that day as when someone was on trial for a crime, the verdict would be written on a stone – a black stone if the verdict was guilty, and a white stone if the verdict was innocent.
2. Another Roman custom was to award a white stone to the victor in an athletic contest. It was like the certificate of achievement they give at athletic contests today, and on the stone was inscribed the person's name. It served as both their medal and their ticket to the awards banquet.
3. It was also customary that invitations and your ticket to other events or banquets were on white stones given to the invited guests.

All this symbolizes Jesus' promise to those who follow him that we will be forgiven and declared innocent of the sins we have committed because Jesus took the consequence of our sin on himself at the cross. As a result, we will be invited and allowed in to be part of the eternal victory banquet and celebration in heaven for eternity.

The meaning of a new name: Names in the Bible are significant because they have to do with the person's identity or destiny. We see people being given new names to reflect that. For example, Abram ("High Father") becomes Abraham "The Father of many nations". That is going to be his destiny. God wrestles with a little sneak named Jacob ("deceiver" or "supplanter"), and God says, you will no longer be called Jacob but Israel because you have "Wrestled with God and prevailed." Jesus looked at Simon who waivers and wobbles and blows hot one day and cold the next and Jesus says, "You will no longer be called Simon, you are Petras, Peter "The rock." "Rocky". Nobody saw a rock when they looked at Simon until Jesus did. And an ordinary guy named Joe is named Barnabas, "Son of encouragement", because of his extraordinarily generous and gracious spirit.

There is going to be a new name that is given to us by Jesus, and it is not just a label, but it will be about our identity, character, redemption, and about ordinary you and ordinary me becoming what God designed you and me to be. It is about the fact that Jesus loves you and desires a spiritually intimate relationship with you. Jesus is saying, I have a special connection with you that is so unimaginably good and will last for eternity.

What a magnificent promise that is! Does that motivate you and me like nothing else to follow Jesus with all-out determination? Does it motivate us to want to grow in our relationship with him instead of living a casual Christian life and compromising in the face of the culture we live in, and the opposition we face because we follow Jesus?