

Compromise condemned

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Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] Welcome to our lunchtime service. This is for the intrepid few who can venture out in perfectly normal weather for this time of year. So, well done.

Let's just turn to our Bibles and we are looking at the first chance of Revelation.

Working through these letters to the seven churches. And this afternoon we are in the letter to the church in Pergamon. So that's chapter 2 verses 12 to 17.

It's page 1029 if you're using the Bibles there. So let me read and then I'll pray and have a think about these verses together. So Revelation 2 verse 12.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamon write, The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword, I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is.

[1 : 10] 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.

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 lets 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, so that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Amen. Let me pray. Our Father in heaven, we do praise you for your power and sovereignty, that you know all things and see all things.

[2 : 32] What a comfort it is to know that none of the trials and temptations that your churches face are hidden from you. You know.

You see all. But you also see our failures, our weaknesses. And so would knowing that lead us to repent, knowing that you are gracious, and that you will not turn away any who call to you for mercy. So forgive us where we strayed, and strengthen us, so that we might hold fast to you, to be faithful to you, even unto death.

So help us now as we gather this afternoon, strengthen our hearts, and encourage us, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, the city of Pergamon must have felt something of a pressure cooker, I think, for the Christians that received this letter from the Apostle John.

The city itself was a place of learning. It had a remarkable library with over 2,000 volumes, pretty substantial in those days. It was a religious melting pot, and home to several cults, and gods, Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and others, all had Pergamon as their base.

[4 : 03] In addition, there was strong Roman influence. The first temple of the imperial cult was built in Pergamon, and it was also home to the Roman government in Asia.

Someone described it this way, if Ephesus was the New York of Asia, Pergamon was its Washington. You can imagine, then, the pressure coming at all angles on the church to bow to these various gods, to submit to the imperial cult, to bow the knee to Rome.

The comparisons with the church today, particularly here in Scotland, are striking. Think of Glasgow, it's a real melting pot of religions. Pluralism is the mantra of the day. The government, hard at work to roll back Christian values and legislation.

Loud and influential voices, calling for the religious liberties, so long taken for granted, to be curtailed. Just think about, I was reading this week about, ongoing debates about male circumcision.

The chief executive of the National Secular Society said that circumcision of male infants is so wrong, it might be grounds to call the police under the Offences Against the Persons Act.

[5 : 17] So not only do secularists want religion out of the public square, they want to regulate it in private too. We feel the pressure, in this sort of environment, don't we?

We feel the pressure to compromise, to keep our heads well below the parapet. Now perhaps you feel that now, perhaps we as Christians feel that now, perhaps not, or perhaps it will be down the line that we feel the pressure, similar to that on the Pergamon church.

And as we've already seen in these letters to the churches, what Jesus says to these specific churches is of relevance to all of the church and in every age. Which is not to say that what Jesus says is true of every individual church at all times, no.

But what Jesus says in this letter to the church in Pergamon, it will be true of churches in the world today. It may be true of us. If not today, then it might be down the line.

10, 20 years, we'll be facing these same pressures. So some of what we see in these letters needs to be locked away for recall at the later days.

[6 : 33] But some of what we see here will be of immediate significance. As we'll see. So three points, just as we look at this letter to the church in Pergamon. First, the courage of the church is commended.

Second, the compromise within the church is condemned. And thirdly, the commonwealth of the church that conquers. C is the letter of the day, just to help you remember.

So first then, verse 13, we see the courage of the church commended. Christ's church shines, even where Satan dwells. Look at verse 13, where we see the little difficulty of the church there in Pergamon.

Jesus knows where his church dwells. And it is not comfortable territory, is it? Jesus describes it as where Satan's throne is, start of verse 13.

And look at the end of verse 13, it's where Satan dwells. Pergamon was a place where Satan reigned and where he dwelt. He was at home in that city.

[7 : 45] And this spiritual reality, well, that was reflected in reality on the ground. As I mentioned, the city was home to several false religions and gods.

It had its temple of emperor worship. It was the center too for the cult of Asclepius, the god of healing, whose symbol was a serpent.

This would not have been a comfortable place at all for those Christians who lived there, whose true king was Jesus, whose real home was heaven. However, there is much to commend the church there in Pergamon.

Look at what Jesus says. 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.

They had faced the sort of persecution that the church in Smyrna, as we saw last week, was anticipating and preparing for. In that letter, Jesus equipped his church for the suffering, the imprisonments and death that would surely come as they stood firm for Christ.

[8 : 57] And it seems that those sufferings had already come to this church in Pergamon. A man named Antipas had been killed. He was a faithful witness to Jesus.

A man faithful unto death who would receive the crown of life. A man who refused to compromise. A man who refused to bow down to the pagan gods in the city.

a man who perhaps through his death made his wife a widow and his children without a father. He would not compromise.

And Jesus commends the church for their courageous stand, for their loyalty to him. They held fast to Jesus' name. That is, they refused to name another name as their true Lord and Master.

They had not denied their faith by yielding to the pressure of burning incense to the emperor and declaring Caesar as Lord. They refused to do that.

[9 : 59] They would not name Caesar as Lord. They lived faithfully even in a place where Satan reigned and dwelt.

You see, it is possible for Christ's church to live and shine even where Satan dwells. Just because a particular place is hard and difficult for the church or for individual Christians does not mean that that church or that individual should withdraw.

No. It is possible for a church, for a Christian to shine and shine bright even in those places. As one preacher put it, we should beware lest the deceitfulness of our hearts lead us to persuade ourselves

that the Lord is guiding us elsewhere into some Christian atmosphere where the strain will be less. We may not withdraw from the place of disappointment just because it is hard and difficult. No doubt those Christians there in Pergamon felt that pull, that pull to find greener grass and less hostility, less opposition.

But how comforted they would have been to hear these words. Christ knew the hardships they faced. He commends them for standing firm. It is possible for Christ's church to live and shine even where Satan dwells.

[11 : 31] There is a but, however, verse 14, but I have a few things against you. It's our second point.

We see the compromise within the church is condemned. Christ's church must not tolerate compromise with the world. So this is verses 14 to 16.

So yes, the church there in Pergamon had stood firm with regards to overt and hostile persecution. But it had failed to notice and arrest seduction from within its own ranks.

Worldly accommodation and compromise had gone unchecked in the lives of some within the church. Now it doesn't seem to be the case that the whole church had gone off track yet.

Rather, it is some amongst their number. the next section of verse 14 says, you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam.

[12 : 36] So it's a group within, a few individuals perhaps, within the church that have compromised. But the church as a whole had failed to tackle it.

What was the nature of the problem? What is the false teaching that has seduced them? Well, some now hold to the teaching of Balaam. You can read all about that in the book of Numbers.

And the episode in question takes place as the people of Israel are travelling through the wilderness on the way to the promised land. And at this point, they are near the kingdom of Moab.

And the king of Moab seeks to destroy the people of Israel, fearing that they would invade his land. And he recruited the pagan prophet Balaam for that task.

And his initial tactic was to call down curses. But that failed. And so he turned to the tactic number two. In the words of Jesus from our letter here in Pergamon, he put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel.

[13 : 44] Balaam managed to get the people of Israel to eat prohibited foods, to enter sexual sin. And he did this by sending in the daughters of Moab into the Israelite camp to seduce them into sin.

And it worked. It wasn't blatant untruth or false doctrine that got them. It was the beautiful women of Moab. Likewise, here in Pergamon, the church had stood firm against the obvious and powerful false religions of Rome and the gods.

They'd even died because of their refusal to compromise there. But they had failed to notice and challenge a far more seductive threat that had crept in. A gentle and easy accommodation to some of the practices of the people around them had gone unchallenged.

They didn't want to be thought of as being too radical. And so they embraced a bit of unassuming religious pluralism. They partook at some of the feasts.

They enjoyed food sacrificed to the idols. They turned a blind eye to sexual immorality. It would have been so very tempting for some there within the church there in Pergamon just to go along with the pagan feasts, the annual festival to Zeus to keep up appearances.

[15 : 07] What harm, they probably thought. I know I don't believe in Zeus and it doesn't really matter if I go along to the feast, does it? What's more of help bringing business to my work or cultivate good relations?

What's the harm in that? The message of the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans is probably something along the lines of this. It was possible, without being disloyal to Christ, to maintain a peaceful coexistence with Rome.

Well, the fact of the matter, as the Lord Jesus points out, is that sometimes it is not possible to maintain loyalty with him and enjoy peace with the world.

In fact, he says if they don't repent, he will, verse 16, come soon and war against them with the sword of his own mouth. So when in Moab, God's people should not have lived like the Moabites did, when in the place where Satan dwells and rules, a Christian shouldn't live like his worldly people.

So you and I need to consider what are the pressure points today? In what areas am I tempted to go along with the world, to enjoy peace with the world at the cost of loyalty to Christ?

[16 : 36] And particularly in these areas of perennial temptation, the ones mentioned here, idolatry and sexual immorality. Always the issue, aren't they, no matter what age you live in.

And presently, it's gender that's top of the political agenda, isn't it? Will we seek peace with the world on that issue? marriage and the right place of sex in marriage between a man and a woman? Will we seek peace with the world where it diverges from that, eagerly promoting sex anywhere but marriage and the celebration of homosexual sex?

are we willing to stick our head above the parapet and challenge what so many seem to be saying and going along with? Are we prepared not only to challenge but also declare what is right and true when it comes to sex and relationships?

But we need not only to watch ourselves to be aware of where we're tempted to compromise, we need also, you and I, together, to be watchful of each other.

[17 : 54] That's the issue that Jesus tackles, isn't it? He addresses the church and he says you have some there who hold to these false teachings. He's rebuking the church for its failure to tackle those people, its failure to hold one another to account.

Now it's not that we're to go around like Miss Marple, looking for the slightest falling out of line. We're not to be heresy hunters like that. But when we do see a brother or sister, veering away from the Lord and his people, when we see them being seduced by the power of the world around and compromising in certain ways, we don't just stand by, do something, speak to them, urge them to repent.

We have responsibility for one another, don't we? A responsibility to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly, that we would teach and admonish each other with all wisdom.

Well, there's our second point, and it's a stern warning, isn't it? Compromise within the church is condemned. But finally, Jesus sets forth the blessing of those who do repent from this compromise. And here's our third point. We see the commonwealth of the church that conquers. Christ's church will not lose out, because God will honour his people's faithfulness.

[19 : 22] This is verse 17. Jesus promises real, abundant, everlasting life for those who seek to remain loyal to him, for those who conquer.

He promises the commonwealth of his people, the good of his provision and care. He promises, verse 17, hidden manna, a white stone with a new name written on it.

Now, the hidden manna, Jesus promises, is a complete contrast to the food some would have eaten in Pergamon that was sacrificed to the idols. Manna was the food provided by the Lord to his people during their wilderness wanderings.

And this hidden manna is a sustenance we can't yet see. It's hidden. Jesus is referring to a spiritual feeding. And it's a feeding that his people won't enjoy in its fullness until the new creation begins with that great marriage supper of the Lamb that we read about in Revelation 19.

And in John's Gospel we read these words of the Lord Jesus. He says, Our fathers ate manna in the wilderness. Jesus then said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.

[20 : 42] For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to his world. Jesus said to them, I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me shall not hunger. Jesus promises to provide for them, but in a way far more enduring and solid than this idle food they're tempted by.

though they refuse to eat the food sacrificed to idols, God will see that they don't go lacking.

He is no man's debtor. He will provide true sustenance for his people, true manna. And so too for God's people today. Know that what God offers you, what he promises you, is of infinitely more value, of infinite longevity compared to the very best of this world's idolatries.

The things of this world can only satisfy temporarily, just a transitory satisfaction. Nothing comparable as an offer from Jesus which we will enjoy in its fullness and forever in the new creation.

[21 : 56] That is what Jesus promises, hidden manna, food that will truly satisfy forever. But Jesus also promises a white stone with a new name written on that stone.

Now commentators, if you read them, have about a dozen explanations for this white stone. But here's the most compelling one. A white stone was given as a token of admission to banquets and feasts back in those days, in contrast to the black ball, which would signify refusal to enter the banquet.

quite something then for these Christians here in Pergamon, whose faithfulness to Christ would have meant exclusion from pagan feasts and festivals. For them to be granted a white stone from the Lord Jesus Christ, well that was to give them access to the banquet to end all banquets. That was surely something for them to cling to, wasn't it? To know that they were given access to that. also they were given a new name by Christ. Now whether it's a new name given to the believer, or it's the name of Christ himself written on stone, either way, it represents a real and enduring union with Christ, a new identity in him, either because he gives us a new name or he stamps his own upon us.

Now this new name is a mark of genuine membership of Christ's new people, a guarantee of life everlasting in the new creation, and it's given to all who trust in Christ.

[23 : 40] It's not earned through merit, but rather it's humbly accepted through penitent faith and humble trust. Jesus holds out to his dear Christians in Pergamon.

He holds out great and abundant blessings, the common wealth of his kingdom, for those who refuse to compromise, who refuse to bow down to the powers of the day, those who hold fast to his name.

And Jesus' words must be a great encouragement to you and I today, mustn't they? He calls us to see beyond the temporary trappings of this world. He calls us to see beyond to his enduring and eternal blessings.

Nothing this world offers can possibly better what Jesus holds out here for his people. So he urges his people, don't compromise. Don't compromise, but rather conquer.

Stand firm. Hold fast to him. Cling to him. Declare him. And he will give you eternal blessings.

[24 : 51] Let me pray and then we'll sing. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father God, we do thank you that you know and see all.

Nothing in this world goes unnoticed by you. You see the pressures on your church, on your people, the pressures to bow down to the gods of this world.

Lord, help us to stand firm. Help us to hold fast to your name. Help us to help one another in that task. As we see others being tempted away.

Lord, help us to say something, to rescue our brothers and sisters, so that we might together stand firm and to know the great blessings that you promise your people to those who conquer.

So, Lord, please help us. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and always.

[26 : 07] Amen.