

Compromise condemned

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 March 2018

Preacher: Paul Brennan

[0 : 00] Good, well, please do turn to Revelation and chapter 2, and we're looking at the third of the seven letters to the churches in Asia.

So chapter 2 and verses 12 to 17. If you're using one of the church Bibles, that's 1028. It's the letter to Pergamum.

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 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.

[1 : 19] 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. Amen.

This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this evening. Please do turn back to Revelation chapter 2. We spend a bit of time looking at these verses together.

Revelation 2 from verse 12. Now, the city of Pergamum must have felt something like a bit of a pressure cooker for the Christians that received this letter from the Apostle John.

[2 : 31] The city itself was a place of learning. It had a remarkable library, over 2,000 volumes. In those times, that was a significant library.

It was a religious melting pot and home to several cults and gods. Zeus, Athena, Dionysius and others had Pergamon as their base.

And in addition, there was a strong Roman influence. The first temple of the imperial cult was built in this city. 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 from all angles on the church there to bow to these various gods, to submit to the imperial cult, to bow the knee to Rome.

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

[3 : 53] Loud and influential voices calling for the religious liberties so long taken for granted to be curtailed. I was just 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 that it might well be grounds to call the police under the Offences Against the Persons Act. So not only do secularists want to push religion out of the public square, but they want to regulate it in private too. Well, that's just one example.

But there are many. We feel the pressure, don't we? Real pressure to compromise, to keep your head well down below the parapet.

Perhaps you feel that pressure now. Perhaps not. Perhaps down the line you'll feel something similar to the pressure on the Pergamum church. And as we've seen already in these letters, what Jesus says to these specific churches is of relevance to all of the church and in every age.

[5 : 03] That's not to say that what Jesus says is true of every individual church at all times. But what Jesus says in this letter to the church in Pergamum will be true of some churches today in the world.

It may be true of our church today. Or if not, 5, 10, 15 years down the line. So somewhat we see in these letters needs to be locked away for a later date.

But other parts, well, they're of immediate significance and application. So three points then from our letter here to the church in Pergamum.

First, the courage of the church is commended. Secondly, the compromise within the church is condemned. And then thirdly, the commonwealth of the church that conquers.

C is the letter of the day. I'll help you remember. Okay, first point, verse 13. The courage of the church is commended. Christ's church shines even where Satan dwells.

[6 : 11] Look at verse 13 there, where we see the real difficulty of the church there in Pergamum. Jesus knows where the church dwells. And it is not comfortable territory, is it?

Jesus describes it as where Satan's throne is, start of verse 13. And at the end of verse 13, it is where Satan dwells. This city, Pergamum, is described as a place where Satan reigns and where he dwells.

He was at home in the city. Now, this spiritual reality is reflected in the reality on the ground. As I mentioned earlier, the city was home to several false religions and gods.

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

You'll see that today on modern medical institutions. They have that snake. Well, this is where it comes from. Satan reigned. He reigned. He dwelt in this city.

[7 : 20] This would not have been a comfortable place at all for the Christians who lived there, whose true king was Jesus, whose real home was heaven. However, there is much to commend the church there.

Look at what the apostle John 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 amongst you.

This church in Pergamum, 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 we looked at last week, Jesus equipped his church for the suffering, the imprisonments, and even death that would surely come as they stood firm for Christ.

And it seems as if those sufferings and deaths had already come to the church in Pergamum. A man named Antipas was killed.

[8 : 22] He was a faithful witness to Christ. He died for that witness. He was a man faithful unto death who would receive the crown of life.

A man who refused to compromise. A man who refused to bow to the pagan gods in the city. A man who perhaps, through his death, made a wife a widow and left children without a father.

Jesus commends the church for their courageous stand, for their loyalty to him, for their refusal to bow down to other gods. They had 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. They had lived faithfully even in the 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 a church or for an individual Christian does not mean that we should withdraw.

[9 : 43] No. It is possible. It is possible for a church, for a Christian to shine, to shine bright, even in those places. Difficult, but possible.

You may well be the only Christian in your office, in your team, in your department. Difficult. And it's difficult. You may have to feel difficult questions from hostile neighbors.

Difficult. But it is possible to hold fast to Jesus' name 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 his appointment just because it's hard and difficult. No doubt, the Christians there in Pergamon felt that pull, that pull to find greener grass somewhere

else, to find somewhere with less opposition, less hostility, where it would be just a bit easier. But how comforted they would have been to hear these words. Jesus knows. He sees. He knows how difficult it is. He knows what they've been willing to do for his name.

[11:06] He knew the hardships they faced. And he commends them for standing firm, for being loyal to him. It is possible for Christ's church to live and shine, even where Satan dwells.

There is a but, however. Look at verse 14. But I have a few things against you. This is our second point. The compromise within the church is condemned.

Christ's church must not tolerate compromise with the world. 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 that the whole church has gone off track yet. Rather, it is some amongst their number. The next section of verse 14 says, You have some.

[12:24] You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam. A group within. A few individuals, perhaps, within the church have compromised.

But the church as a whole had failed to really tackle them. What's the nature of the problem? What is the teaching that has seduced them?

Well, it says, Some now hold to this teaching of Balaam. Now, you can read all about that in the book of Numbers. And the episode takes place as the people of Israel are traveling through the wilderness on their way to the promised land.

And at this point, they are near Moab. And the king of Moab seeks to destroy them, fearing they would perhaps invade his land. And he recruited the pagan prophet Balaam for that task.

And Balaam's initial tactic was to call down curses. But that failed. And so he turns to tactic number two. And in the words of Jesus from our letter here to Pergamum, he put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel.

[13:31] Balaam managed to get the men of Israel to eat prohibited foods and to enter into 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, false doctrine that got them. It was the beautiful women of Moab. And likewise here in Pergamum, the church had stood firm against the obvious and powerful false religions of Rome and the gods.

They'd even died because of a refusal to compromise on those issues. 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. They let it go unchallenged. They didn't want perhaps to be thought of as too radical.

And so they embraced a bit of unassuming religious pluralism. They partook of some of the feasts. They enjoyed the food sacrificed to the idols. They turned a blind eye to sexual immorality.

[14:41] It would have been so very tempting for some there in Pergamum just to go along to the pagan feasts, the annual festival to Zeus and keep up appearances. What harm, they perhaps thought.

I know I don't believe in Zeus. It doesn't really matter if I go to the feast. And what's more, I'll help the business and cultivate good relations. What's the harm in that, they may have thought. The message of the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans was probably something along the lines that it is possible.

It is possible without being disloyal to Christ to maintain a peaceful coexistence with Rome. Well, the fact of the matter is, as the Lord Jesus points out, it is sometimes not possible to maintain loyalty with him and enjoy peace with the world.

Sometimes those things are not compatible, often not. In fact, he says, if they don't repent, he will, verse 16, come soon and war against them with the sword of his 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, God's people shouldn't live like those worldly people.

[16:01] 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?

And particularly in these areas of perennial temptation. The ones mentioned here, idolatry and sexual immorality. Now, presently, it's, in terms of the political agenda, it's gender, isn't it?

Gender, that's the top of the agenda. Will we seek peace with the world on that issue? Or take 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. Will we go along with it?

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

[17 : 12] To set out the positive of God's pattern. As Glenn Harrison was telling us last year, we have a better story to tell. Are we going to tell it? Are we going to promote what is good and right?

But it's not just being prepared to speak up on such issues. Are we, in terms of our own behavior, are we compromising?

As the Lord Jesus looks at our lives, does he see compromise? Now, of course, none of us are perfect. And if we pause for just a moment and we're honest and realistic, we'll see, of course, there are areas where we fall short.

But the particular focus here, the particular issues mentioned, are of a serious nature here, aren't they? Jesus is comparing behavior amongst some there in Pergamum with the events surrounding Balaam and Numbers.

Now, just listen to a verse from that account in Numbers 25. When Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab.

[18 : 19] These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people bowed down to their gods. This was serious, blatant unfaithfulness.

This was in-your-face sort of stuff. You can't hide that sort of thing away. The men were sleeping with the women of Moab. They were going to their sacrifices and bowing down to their gods. Serious stuff. And similar things seemed to have gone unchallenged in Pergamum. Word would no doubt have got around. Oh, you know, so-and-so.

Well, he's been sleeping around with some of the prostitutes at the Temple of Zeus. He's even been sacrificing at the altar. But we better not make a fuss. His business is going well. They contribute a lot to the church coffers. Let's just let it pass. Now, we can think that sort of thing would never happen here, don't we?

[19 : 19] That would never happen. We're a church that stands for the truth. Well, so did the church in Pergamum. It doesn't take much for a church to turn a blind eye, even to blatant sins like these.

That's a shocking thing, isn't it? This was blatant. This wasn't hidden away in some corner. These were blatant things. And the church failed to deal with it. So we need not only to watch ourselves to be aware of where we're tempted to compromise.

We also, you and I, together, to be watchful of each other. That's the issue that Jesus tackles, isn't it? He addresses the church and says, You have some there who follow the teaching that leads into serious sin.

He's rebuking the church for their failure as a church to tackle those people. For its failure to hold one another to account. So that's the challenge corporately for us, isn't it?

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.

[20 : 48] We don't sweep it under the carpet. We don't pretend it away, just turn the blind eye. No. We speak to them. We urge them. We call them. We plead with them to repent.

Repent. That takes some courage, doesn't it? To do that. That takes courage. But we do need to take Jesus' warning seriously, don't we?

Because it is a serious warning. Look at what he says he will do. He promises that if they don't repent, if they don't repent, he will come and war against them with the sword of his mouth. And that is a terrifying prospect. Isn't it better? For your wayward neighbor to hear tough words from you and repent than face the sword of Jesus' judgment.

We have responsibility for one another. A responsibility to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly so that we would teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.

[21 : 49] That's our responsibility to each other as Christians in this church. And if that's true for all of us, how much more for those in leadership?

So pray that those who lead this church would not leave unchallenged, blatant compromise of the order that we see here in Pergamon. It's the easiest thing in the world to let things slip by.

Challenging people is uncomfortable. It's messy. But the church in Pergamon failed to do it. They let it go. So pray for your leaders. But they'll have the courage to tackle such things.

And if this warning, if these words here in Revelation chapter 2, if this call to repent in verse 16 is for you this evening, perhaps you're compromising these very ways, then you must repent.

Repent today, this evening. Call out to the Lord for forgiveness. He will not turn you away. All who call on him for mercy, he will welcome. Perhaps that's you tonight.

[22 : 59] Perhaps you need to repent. 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 for those who do repent from such compromise.

Here's our third point. We see the commonwealth of the church that conquers. Christ's church will not lose out because God will honor his people's faithfulness.

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, his everlasting commonwealth in contrast to the temporary trappings of the world, the idolatries and sexual immoralities that offer only temporary satisfaction, that promise far more than they can ever deliver.

Jesus, here in verse 17, he promises hidden manna. He promises a white stone with a new name written on it. Now, the hidden manna Jesus promises is a complete contrast to the food some have eaten in Pergamum, food that was sacrificed to idols.

Manna was the food provided from the Lord to his people during their wilderness wanderings. And this hidden manna is a sustenance we can't yet see.

[24 : 36] It's hidden. And Jesus is, I think, referring to a spiritual feeding, a feeding that his people won't enjoy in its fullness until the new creation begins with that marriage supper of the Lamb that we read about in Revelation 19.

In John's Gospel, we read these words of the Lord Jesus. Our fathers ate the 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. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to this world.

But 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 the idle food they were tempted to.

Though they refuse to eat that food, God will see that they don't go lacking. He is no man's debtor. They will know true, lasting sustenance, true manna from heaven.

[25 : 55] And so too for God's people today. Know that what God offers you, what he promises to you, is of infinitely more value, infinite longevity compared to the very best of this world's idolatries.

Things of this world can only provide temporary and transitory satisfaction. The things that were tempting some in Pergamum were just not worth it. They were nothing compared to what is on offer from Jesus, which will enjoy in its fullness and forever in the new creation.

He promises a hidden manna, everlasting sustenance for his people who overcome, who conquer. But he also promises a white stone with a new name written on that stone.

Now commentators have about 12 different explanations for this white stone. But here's the most compelling one I read of. A white stone was given as a token of admission to banquets and feasts in these days, in contrast to the proverbial black ball, which signified refusal.

So to be given a white stone, that gave you admission. Now to have these words from the Lord Jesus, who's promising to give them a white stone, quite something for them, for the Christians in Pergamum, whose faithfulness to the Lord Jesus would have so often meant exclusion from the great pagan feasts and festivals in the city.

[27 : 34] For them to be granted a white stone from the Lord Jesus Christ, well, that would give them access to the banquet to end all banquets. Wouldn't that have been something to cling to for those Christians there in Pergamum?

Shut out from the feasts to the pagan gods, but access to the banquets that goes on forever with Christ and new creation. And this new name that the Lord Jesus promises, the new name given by Christ, now whether that's a new name given to the believer or the name of Christ himself, either way, it represents a real and enduring union with the Lord Jesus Christ, a new identity in him, either because he gives us a new name or he stamps his own over us.

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

This stone with a new name written on it, it's not earned through merit, but rather it's humbly accepted through penitent faith and humble trust. Jesus holds out great and abundant blessings, the commonwealth of his kingdom.

He promises that for his people who refuse to compromise, who refuse to bow down to the powers of the day, who hold fast to his name. That is what Jesus promises for those who conquer.

[29 : 13] 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 can offer can come close, can possibly better what Jesus holds out here for his people, the commonwealth of his kingdom for all eternity, in contrast to the temporary pleasures that this world offers.

And so the Lord Jesus appeals to his church, don't compromise, but rather conquer. Hold fast his name, and he will give you the commonwealth.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Our Father, thank you again that you know your church.

You see everything. And you know where we dwell as your people. You know the hardships and pressures. You know each one of our hearts.

[30 : 35] And all that is a great comfort to know that you know. But it's also a great challenge. For you see our sin.

You see our wayward affections. And so would you help us to respond to your word to us tonight, as individuals, as a church, that we would be those who conquer, not compromise, and that we would truly be our brother's keepers, seeking to help and hold one another to account, that we wouldn't let some drift into compromise, but rather together, be a church striving and conquering. Help us to that end. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.