

Contending for the Truth

Revelation 2:12-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ February 21, 2021 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

¹³“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴But 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 people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. ¹⁵So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. (Revelation 2:12-17, NRSV)



Travel around and you will notice that many cities have certain features, natural or architectural, that dominate the landscape. Often times these features tell you a great deal about what the people of that city value. My hometown of Denver is overshadowed by the towering Rocky Mountains. It’s the first thing you notice when you go there. Then you quickly learn that the people of Denver are crazy about their mountains. There are more Subaru’s with ski racks in Denver than there are people. St. Louis is dominated by its arch. It’s the tallest accessible building in Missouri. It represents, of course, the gateway to the West. What’s most impressive about New York City is its skyline, each towering skyscraper a testament to the value of business and finance in that great city. And what’s the centerpiece of our city? Everything in Sacramento revolves around the Capital building, right? Nobody visits here and misses the fact that this is a government town.

The message to the church in Pergamum begins with a clue to the feature that dominated that ancient city: “**I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is.**” You see, Pergamum was a city built on a high rock, a rock that almost looked like a throne. But Satan’s throne? Well, on top of that high rock, perched in such a way that everything else was in their shadow, were several pagan temples. The most prominent temple was dedicated to Askelpios, the Greek god of healing. The symbol for Askelpios was the serpent. Temples priests there would even use snakes in their healing services, snakes which were allowed to slither free inside the temple. They were harmless, but still! Sick people would actually sleep in the temple overnight, believing that if one of these snakes slid over you while you slept, the touch would bring healing.¹ Some of you would rather learn to live with your illness!

In scripture, of course, the serpent often represents the evil one, Satan. Think of how the devil first appears in creation, to Adam and Eve in the form of a snake. What’s clear is that the church in Pergamum in those days found themselves in the midst of great spiritual evil which opposed them, living in the shadow of Satan’s throne. It’s no wonder that in the introduction to this message we read, “**These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.**” This is a reference back to the vision of Christ in chapter 1. The believers in Pergamum needed to recognize this aspect of Christ, that he was in their midst to do battle. Not physical warfare; this is not a physical sword. This is a spiritual battle and Christ’s sword is his Word, the truth for which he stands, the truth which he embodies.

I hope you understand that the church is always in the midst of spiritual warfare, against, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 6:12, “**the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.**”² When we recognize this and are prepared, Christ can protect us and deliver us. When we fail to recognize this, the battle may already have been lost.

These spiritual attacks can come from both outside the church and inside the church. They come from the outside when the church finds itself surrounded by a

¹ Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge* (Regent College Publishing, 2004), 78.

² Unless otherwise noted, this and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

culture that is openly and absolutely opposed to its message and mission. In those cases, the culture will try, sometimes violently, to stamp out the church through persecution. We can think of many examples of this in history, and even plenty of examples in our world today where this is happening, in places like North Korea, and Somalia, and Pakistan, places violently opposed to the gospel and those who embrace it. Interestingly enough, this strategy, however, is rarely effective. In fact, do you know where the church is growing most rapidly in our world today? Not in the United States, by the way, not by a long shot. The church is growing most rapidly today in Iran. Though Christians in that country will pay a heavy price if they are discovered by the authorities, the church in Iran is now 1 million strong and growing by 20% every year. That's doubling every five years!³ Similar things are happening in other countries where Christians are openly persecuted. There's an old saying, "Trying to stamp out the gospel is like hammering a nail – the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes."⁴

One of the reasons the church tends to thrive under this sort of open persecution is that the lines are so clear. There are no half-hearted Christians in Iran, people who wander into Sunday worship once in a while but whose lives look mostly like the non-Christians around them. No, to follow Jesus in such a context means that you are truly committed to following Jesus. This is why the enemy usually has much more success with the other strategy, the strategy of attacking the church from within. You see, when the evil one can blur the lines between what the church believes and what the surrounding pagan or secular culture believes, it's much easier to lead the church astray. The church begins to adopt the values and lifestyles of the surrounding culture, values and lifestyles which are significantly different than the gospel, but subtle enough in their differences to be smuggled inside. It's like the frog in the kettle, without knowing it the church gradually finds itself conformed to the culture around it more than it is conformed to Christ.

By the way, our church is in danger of this second kind of attack, the attack from within, as is the whole Christian church in the modern secular West. While many of us have come to realize that the United States is not, after all, a Christian nation with a Christian culture, the veneer of our culture is still Christianese enough to make discerning truth from falsehood quite difficult. I'll say more about this in a minute.

Returning to the text, Christ affirms the church in Pergamum for resisting attacks from the outside. At least one of their members, a saint named Antipas, was martyred for his faith in Christ. Apparently many others in the congregation had also refused to deny their faith in the face of harsh persecution. At the same time, however, some in the congregation had apparently fallen prey to an inside attack and the lines between truth and falsehood were starting to blur. It is in response to this dangerous development that Jesus offers strong words of truth in love.

Specifically, Christ declares that there are, **“some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication.”** Balaam, as you may know, was the pagan prophet we read about in the Old Testament book of Numbers. Balak was the king of Moab at the time, an enemy of Israel, who tried to get Balaam to put a curse on Israel. It was an overt attack that didn't work because God intervened, through a talking donkey of all things, and told Balaam to bless Israel instead. Later on, however, Balaam succeeded with a more subtle attack, an inside job. Moabite women were sent to infiltrate Israel and seduce the Israelite men. This was a dual-pronged attack because it presented not only sexual temptation (these men certainly already had wives) but the temptation of idolatry. You see, these women worshipped pagan idols and, as you may know, many a man will make many a compromise to satisfy his sexual lust, and so they welcomed these women and their false gods.⁵ At least some in the church in Pergamum had evidently been seduced by the same subtle temptations of their surrounding culture, temptations which the Nicolaitans, another group of false teachers mentioned here, also promoted.

What's fascinating to realize is that these two issues – idol worship and sexual immorality – were prominent not just in Pergamum, but in the wider early church. At the Jerusalem Council, one of the earliest gatherings of Christian leaders recorded in Acts 15, the apostles and others outlined what they considered to be minimum expressions of loyalty to Christ, marks that, at the very least, ought to distinguish Christians from the surrounding culture. Here is the decree that came from that council:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than

³ Religion News Service press release, "Satellite TV, social media fuel 'world's fastest growing church' in Iran", read at <https://religionnews.com/2020/10/20/satellite-tv-social-media-fuel-worlds-fastest-growing-church-in-iran/>

⁴ Darrell Johnson, 79.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), 21.

these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.⁶

If you read Paul's letters, especially his letters to the Corinthian church, you'll see that he also agrees that these were two of the major social-spiritual issues that threatened the early church from within.⁷ What I want to show you this morning is that these are still among the major issues that threaten the church in our context. The worship of idols and sexual immorality are both widely glorified and embraced in the modern secular West, and the church has, to a large degree, made the same mistake the church in Pergamum made by embracing these values from within, often without realizing it. Let's look at these one at a time.⁸

First, idol worship. In the ancient Greco-Roman world it was quite common for people to gather for feasts dedicated to false gods, or idols. Animals would be sacrificed to the idol, and then the meat from those animals would provide the food for the party. Apparently, it was common for some Christians to participate in these feasts, and justify doing so by saying that these idols were just wood and stone. "What's the harm in going to a pagan party when the thing they are worshipping doesn't even exist in the first place? It's no big deal!"

Which is true. Asklepios was a fake. He and his snakes were all a sham. No such being exists. He's made up. Nonetheless, participation in his feast was not a neutral act, because hidden behind these invented idols, real spiritual forces were at work. In his teaching on this issue in 1st Corinthians, Paul puts it this way, **"What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons."**⁹ Yes, the idols were fake, but the spiritual forces behind the idols were, and are, real. And those forces are absolutely evil, opposed to Christ and his ways.

Add to this the fact that in those days when you sat down and shared a meal with somebody it was no casual affair. In the ancient world you only ate with people to whom you were bonded. The meal itself was a token of the covenant between you. This is why Jesus, by the way, gets in such trouble for eating with "the wrong kinds of people". The religious leaders couldn't

understand why he would bond himself to prostitutes and tax collectors! It's also why the sign of the New Covenant between us and God through Christ is a meal, the Lord's Supper. You are bonded to those with whom you break bread. Should followers of Christ in Pergamum then share a meal with the devil and thus bond themselves not only to him but his values and agenda? Never! These idol feasts were not neutral ground. There is no neutral ground in creation. All ground, all activity, is either sacred or cursed, holy or unholy.

In our context, we aren't surrounded by idols made of wood and stone. Instead, most of our idols take the form of ideas and movements. Cultural commentator Mark Sayers points out that in the secular West our culture is, for instance, committed to the assumption that we can, as he puts it, have God's Kingdom without God, the King.¹⁰ We can make heaven on earth and we don't need God to do it. Radical individualism (the idea that we can accomplish everything important on our own) and hyper-consumerism (the idea that the acquisition of material things leads to ultimate fulfillment), these ideas have led us to believe that through politics, science, technology, education, and economics we can, *on our own*, create the world we all want to live in. As a result, we end up worshipping the false idol of human progress instead of the reality God's presence.

This thinking has seeped into the church, as much in the evangelical wing as in the progressive wing. In fact, much of the church in America believes and behaves no different than the rest of America, Christians having more in common with their political allies, for instance, than with fellow believers. In doing so we are, without realizing it, eating food sacrificed to idols and forming bonds with spiritual forces in our world that are hell-bent against the message and the mission of the gospel. In doing so we are playing with fire, seeking the Kingdom without the King.

Along with this is the related issue of sexual immorality. You may not realize that sexual immorality in the ancient Greco-Roman world made the sexual immorality of our day look tame by comparison. Nothing was off limits. The thinking was, "I can do whatever I want sexually as long as I don't hurt anybody else." This idea was rooted in the ancient belief that the human body was nothing more than a shell. It wasn't sacred, wasn't permanent, wasn't connected to our true selves, our true person or soul.

⁶ Acts 15:28-29

⁷ Read 1st Corinthians 8 and 10 for examples of Paul's discussion of idol worship. Read 1st Corinthians 5 and 7 for examples of Paul's discussion of sexual immorality.

⁸ I'm relying heavily on Darrell Johnson in the examination of these two issues.

⁹ 1st Corinthians 10:19-20

¹⁰ See especially Mark Sayers, *Reappearing Church* (Moody Publishers, 2019).

People believed that since they would ultimately be liberated from their bodies, they could do whatever they wanted with their bodies in the meantime. What happens in the body, stays in the body! More than that even, our sexuality isn't even really about our body but what's inside us, what we feel and think is what matters most. Is any of this sounding familiar? These are old, old ideas which have gained a fresh new hold on the world.

This is totally contrary to the teachings of Christ and the New Testament. God created our bodies and, therefore, values our bodies. So much so that God himself, in Christ, took on a human body and didn't shed it when he died but was resurrected *in his body*. We declared earlier in the creed that we believe in the resurrection *of the body!* You don't just have a body; you are a body. It's not a shell, but an integral part of who you are, intimately connected to your spirit and your mind. Our bodies are perishable, yes, but in time they will be raised imperishable. You will have your body, a resurrected version of your body, for eternity.¹¹ What we do with our bodies we do with ourselves, and what we do with ourselves has lasting implications.

One of the implications of this reality is that sex is far more than just a physical act. From the very beginning of creation, the Bible teaches us, in fact, that when two people are united sexually they become one flesh, united with one another in profound and permanent ways. Sex is a stunningly beautiful gift, created by God and given by God to be used in the context of a lifelong man-plus-woman marriage, the only earthly covenant that can sustain the weight of this bond. Renowned Christian ethicist Lewis Smedes puts it this way: "There is no such thing as casual sex... Nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside."¹² This is a moral law embedded into creation, and we ignore it at our own peril in the same way we might ignore the physical law of gravity. It's just the way things are.

I know, this seems outdated or foreign, even offensive, to some of you, which ought to tell us how much we have been conformed to the thinking of the world around us. But as Anglican Bishop, N.T. Wright, puts it, "Sexual morality isn't, as it is so often portrayed, a matter of a few ancient rules clung to by some rather conservative persons when the rest of society has moved on."¹³ Christ is absolutely intolerant towards sexual immorality of all kinds because he knows how it enslaves and hurts people - and he loves people, even more than people love themselves. This should be so

easy to see, if we would only recognize the widespread brokenness in our society that has resulted from our unwillingness to trust God and use this beautiful gift well.

To all this Christ has a clear word to the church, both then and now: "**Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.**" Again, this is not a threat of physical violence. This is Jesus saying to the church, "Turn around and discern the truth!" The truth matters. And if we do not contend for the truth, clearly distinguishing the teaching and values of the world around us from the teachings and values of Christ, there will come a day when Christ will come and, by his Word, cut through our conformity to untruth, and expose our deception.¹⁴ That word 'repent' simply means to turn around, to turn back towards Christ, who not only has the truth but embodies the Truth. Remember that it was Jesus who declared to his followers, "**If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.**"¹⁵

Please understand, it's not our job to go out to condemn the world. Jesus himself didn't come to condemn the world. Yes, the world around us worships innumerable false gods and, without realizing, ends up subjecting itself to spiritual forces that only intend to do harm. Yes, the world around us has discarded sexual morality in ways that grieve the heart of God. But nowhere does Jesus call us to go out and condemn those in the world who have made these choices. For one, *they* are not our enemies, only influenced by our enemy. Secondly, who are we to condemn? Which one of us hasn't, in our own lives, struggled mightily with misplaced worship and sexual sin? All of us have. Finally, how can the world know any better? It can't? Apart from Christ, people remain absolutely blind to his ways which lead to life. That's why our conversations and interactions with the world around us must be marked exclusively by the love and grace of Christ which he extended to all people. People can't be set free until they come to know the One who can set them free. So we must lead with love. Jesus is absolutely intolerant towards these sins, but he absolutely loves and welcomes those who commit them. Thank God he does, for who among us would be here if he didn't!

Within the church, however - and this is where I want to end - we must tirelessly contend for the truth, meaning that we must not show any tolerance for these

¹¹ Paul offers explicit teaching on this in 1st Corinthians 15.

¹² Cited by Darrell Johnson, 84.

¹³ N.T. Wright, 21.

¹⁴ Hebrews 4:12 declares, "**Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from**

spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

¹⁵ John 8:31-32

and other ideas and practices which run contrary to God's Word. In the church we must be welcoming to all people – yes! - but not to all ideas. I love this translation of Romans 12:2 - **“Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.”**¹⁶ By immersing ourselves in God's Word, recognizing it as the unique and authoritative witness to Christ and his truth, we can ensure that our lives, beginning with what we think, are shaped by God's truth rather than by the deceptions of our world.

Jesus hates it when people are hurt because he loves people, all people. Yes, he hates it when people are sick, or in poverty, or oppressed. But understand those are temporary prisons. We ought to work tirelessly to set people free from these prisons, but all long with the knowledge that as sick, impoverished or oppressed people trust Christ they will one day, in this life or the next, be set free. But people who reject the truth lock themselves up from the inside in permanent prisons. Lies and deception, especially when they deceive people from the truth embodied and taught by Christ, lock people in eternal prisons. This is why Jesus hates falsehood the most, even more than other things which hurt people.

His plea to the church in Pergamum is the same as it is to us: **“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”** This is an invitation really, an invitation to not only accept the truth of God's Word but then to shape our lives to it accordingly. God will not force obedience or conformity. If we choose to not contend for the truth, he will allow it, and then allow the consequences that come with such a decision.

But if we do contend for the truth, there is a beautiful promise here for us. To the church in Pergamum, and to us, he offers both hidden manna and a white stone on which is written a secret new name.

The manna, of course, refers to the mysterious food that God daily provided to the Israelites to sustain them on their long journey through the wilderness towards the Promised Land. As we refuse to eat at the tables of the world's idols, we will find true nourishment at another table. Remember Jesus' promise: **“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”**¹⁷ The Lord's Supper regularly reminds us that our very

souls are nourished by Christ who has given his body and blood so that we might have life. Nothing else but Christ satisfies the soul.

The white stone is a bit more mysterious, and I found several intriguing interpretations offered by various commentators. In the end, all interpretations essentially point to the same thing, an intimacy with Christ beyond what we can imagine. So many in our world seek their identity primarily through their sexuality. By contrast, as we are united with Christ, devoting our trust and obedience to him alone, we find our true identity. Christ names us nothing less than beloved and highly favored sons and daughters of God!

Brothers and sisters, may these promised blessings provoke us to keep contending for the truth, tirelessly and without compromise. For the truth, as we know it in Jesus Christ, will indeed set us free.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the message to Pergamum again, Revelation 2:12-17. What stands out to you from Christ's message here to the church?
2. The worship of idols and sexual immorality were the sins some embraced in the congregation at Pergamum. Have things changed, or are those still issues today in the church? If not, what cultural influences do you see infiltrating the Christian church in our day?
3. What are the idols that Christians in the modern secular West tend to worship? Do you believe there are unseen evil spiritual forces behind those idols, forces that seek to rob Christ of his rightful glory?
4. Why is the Bible, and Christ himself, so intolerant towards any violation of the boundaries God has set up around human sexuality? Why does it matter so much what we do with our bodies?
5. Why would scripture, here and elsewhere, use a weapon (i.e. sword) to symbolize God's Word? How might God's truth be a weapon?

¹⁶ From the J.B. Philips translation

¹⁷ John 6:35

6. Christ promises that those who persevere in contending for the truth will be rewarded with 'hidden manna' and a 'new name'. How do these promises give you hope and encouragement?
7. Christ challenges us here to have ears to listen to what the Spirit is saying to us. What is the Spirit of God saying to you/us through this message?
8. How is God calling you to think or live differently?

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



What are things that people around us in the world believe that we as Christians don't believe?

Suggested Scriptures for the Week, as we offer God 1% of our day (15 minutes or more) focused on His Word.

Monday:	Revelation 10 / Psalm 23
Tuesday:	Revelation 11 / Psalm 24
Wednesday:	Revelation 12 / Psalm 25
Thursday:	Revelation 13 / Psalm 26
Friday:	Revelation 14 / Psalm 27
Saturday:	Revelation 15 / Psalm 28
Sunday:	Revelation 16 / Psalm 29