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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

These seven churches we are studying represent all the churches of all the ages. The section we are in right now is in the present tense and is talking about people just like us, churches just like churches today.

We are going to study the letter our Lord wrote to the church at Pergamum in Revelation 2:12-17:

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there in your church who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”

The church in Pergamum is the third of the seven churches. By now you have no doubt picked out the pattern repeated in each of these seven letters. First, Jesus identifies and says some things about himself. Then he addresses the church and in every case except one, says something positive about the church. Then in all of the cases except two, he points out problems in the church and he tells them what to do about it. Then every letter ends with an invitation and a promise telling them if they will do this then he promises to respond in this way. So, let’s look at this church at Pergamum and talk about that and think about what God wants to do for us. The title of the message is “Kicking Satan Off the Throne,” because twice Jesus says Satan has his throne in Pergamum and Pergamum is where Satan lives.

I. THE PLACE OF THE CHURCH

Number one, consider the place of the church at Pergamum. If someone were to ask you where you are from, you’d probably say, “Tyler, Texas,” or wherever it may be “Whitehouse” or wherever. When we travel, a lot of people ask us where we were from because of our accents. When we say, “Tyler, Texas,” a lot of them know Tyler is the Rose Capitol of Texas and they would say, “The Rose City,” or “I’ve been to Tyler. That’s a nice place.” It’s good that Tyler is known as a beautiful place with friendly people but what if somebody asked you, “Where are you from?” or “Where do you live?” and you said, “Oh, I live where Satan’s throne is.” or “I live where Satan lives.” They’d say, “Where in the world is that?” It’s interesting in fact; it is amazing Jesus identifies Pergamum as the place where Satan has his throne. Isn’t Satan everywhere? No he is not! Only God is omnipresent and for you to believe Satan exists

everywhere is to ascribe to him an attribute belonging to God alone. Satan is a fallen angel. His influence and his sinister organization stretches all across this planet but he can only be in one place at one time. Where he is we don't know but, Jesus knows and Jesus knew Satan had his throne in this city of Pergamum. He knew Satan dwelt there and was an important place in his sinister kingdom.

1. Great learning: A great library

Pergamum was basically known for two things: It was a place of great learning. In the ancient world there were two cities with great libraries. First and most significant was the great library at Alexandria in northern Egypt. It had over 300,000 volumes in the form of scrolls. The greatest center of intellectual learning and academic study in the ancient world was in Alexandria, Egypt. When the Muslims overran Alexandria, Egypt, they burned every volume in the library. Oh the learning that must have been lost when all of that was burned! The second greatest library in the ancient world was in Pergamum with over 200,000 volumes in their library and in their university. Pergamum was a center of learning and is where people came to study. As I mentioned earlier, every book in those days was hand-copied. Papyrus was from Egypt and was made of pieces of reeds mashed together—a forerunner to our paper—and was very scarce in this part of the world. So Pergamum perfected the practice of taking animal skins, stretching them and using them as parchment to write upon. Even today when someone graduates from college we say they get their “sheepskin,” which is a reference to the time when writing was done on the skins of animals. Pergamum was a great place of learning.

But I.Q. has nothing to do with one's spiritual commitment. Jesus said in fact “in the last days men will be ever learning,” will be more and more educated, “but farther and farther away from the truth.” It is possible for you to learn so many facts you can be accurate and still not know the truth that comes from Jesus Christ. You can go to university campuses today and find people who are intellectually advanced who *do* love Jesus and love God's word, but let's face it; usually on the average the higher the academic standing of people, the less time they have for the Bible and God's word. That's not always true, but it's true to a great extent. Just because there's great learning it does not necessarily mean there is great spiritual commitment. In this city of great learning was where Satan's kept his throne.

2. Great religion: Aesculapius cult

Pergamum was also known as a religious center. When the Babylonian Empire collapsed, some of that mystery religion was tied to astrology and Satan moved over to Pergamum. Many scholars believe this was the center of that mystery cult that came from Babylon that we're going to learn more about in the book of Revelation. I think it is still present in one form or another today, it is just disguised. This is where there was great religion. As I mentioned earlier, the Romans were pantheistic—they believed god was everywhere in everything and everything or anything could be a god. They were also polytheistic—they believed there were many gods. Jesus? Sure one more god won't hurt! The more the merrier. But when the Christians came along and said, “No there is only *one* God and his son, Jesus is the *only* way to heaven.” that's when they were persecuted. Pergamum was a very religious city.

Have you ever seen the symbol for the medical profession or a pharmacy? It’s a staff with two snakes intertwined to the top. It is the symbol of the American Medical Association. That symbol came from Pergamum. The god Asclepius, the god of healing, was prominent in this city. There was a great religious center where people came from all over the Roman Empire to be healed. It was like their Mayo Clinic. I know you shudder to even think about this, but they used snakes as part of their therapeutic treatment. People were put in dark areas at this place at night and where non-poisonous snakes crawled all over them. They believed if these non-poisonous snakes crawled over you at night you would be healed. I’d just as soon be sick AMEN! But the worship of Asclepius made Pergamum a great religious center and as I have said Jesus said, “Satan’s throne is there.”

Why did Jesus say Satan has a throne? In the scriptures Satan is often given a title of authority. He is called, “The Prince of the Power of the Air.” The word, *prince*, is a term of royalty, of control and authority. In the Old Testament he is seen even is identified as the “Prince of Persia.” That’s why in the New Testament when it says “we are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers” against spiritual wickedness in high places and the rulers of darkness of this world. God has temporarily given Satan limited authority in this world. Satan is not in Hell shoveling coals into some big furnace. He doesn’t wear red longjohns, and have pointed ears and a pointed tail. The Bible says, “He has disguised himself as an angel of light.” We probably wouldn’t recognize him. The Bible says, “He is like a roaring lion, roaming about, seeking whom he may devour.” and Jesus writes to these people at Pergamum and he says, “You folks have it really tough because you are where Satan’s throne is.”

II. THE PRAISE FOR THE CHURCH

1. My name is held true

Number two, Jesus gives them some praise. He praises the church and makes three personal, possessive statements to encourage them to continue to be faithful. He says, “My name is held true.” Look, if you will, there in verse 13 he says, “I know where you live, where Satan has his throne, yet you remain true to my name.” There’s the name of Jesus. They had many gods: Apollo, Aphrodite, Jupiter, etc. One of their most popular gods was a god who is still worshiped today in America—Bacchus, the god of wine, drunkenness and partying. Today, when someone says, “Let’s party! Party hearty!” They think the only good thing in life to do is just party hard! that’s the god, Bacchus. Drunkenness and debauchery aren’t anything new. They worshiped Bacchus back then. They just gave him a name and we don’t but, he still exists today and every Saturday night many people kneel at his altar. but Jesus said, “In the midst of all of these other names” Apollo, Jupiter, Bacchus, Aphrodite, Diana, Zeus, Mercury...” my name is being held up as well!” Isn’t it wonderful that we as Christians have the opportunity to lift up the name of Jesus? How many times this week have you lifted up the name of Jesus? The last seven days how many times have you spoken to somebody about Jesus? I love our church and Jesus loves this church but, sometimes we are much more prone to talk about our church or to talk about our choir or to talk about our city than we are to talk about Lord Jesus. Are you holding up the name of Jesus? He said to these people, “I commend you for holding up my name in a pagan environment.” There are people out there who need to hear the name of Jesus.

2. My faith is not denied

Secondly, He said, “My faith is not being denied.” As I mentioned earlier, once a year every resident of the Roman Empire was required to burn incense to Caesar and to say, “Caesar is Lord.” Most people just did it without any problem because just as they believed in all the other gods, sure, Caesar can be one more of the many gods but the Christians said, “No, we will not deny our Lord Jesus.” He said, “I commend you for that because you are not denying the faith that has been given to you.”

How many times have you lifted up the name of Jesus this week? Have you been guilty of denying the Lord Jesus? And how do you deny the Lord Jesus? The same way Peter denied Him. Somebody comes up to you and says, “Are you a Christian?” you can just say outwardly “No, I’m not a Christian.” That’s denying Jesus, but chances are, you didn’t do that this week. By some act you did some or word you used some deed you performed did you deny Jesus Christ? Did you know non-Christians are watching you and are listening to you? They are people with whom you work, go to school with, and you may not know it, but they know you go to church, and they may even know you go to Green Acres Baptist Church, and they know you name the name of Jesus. You don’t have to stand up and say, “I don’t believe in Jesus” to deny him. It may be that off-color joke you told, it may be that profanity you used and I tell you when you do something like that do you know what non-Christian are saying? “Uh huh I knew it! I knew that it was all just one big faith game.” Jesus said to this church. “I commend you because you are not denying the faith.”

3. My martyrs are dying

Then, there is one other thing. He says, “My name is being held high.” He says, “My faith is not being denied.” then, he says number three “My martyrs are dying.” He says, “You are willing to die for me. My martyrs are dying.” Look, if you will, there it says, in the last part of verse 13. “Antipas, my faithful witness, has been put to death in your city.” I encourage every one of you to get a book entitled, *Fox’s Book of Martyrs*, because it gives a description of many of the martyrs who died for their faith in the early church. The emperor Nero used and dip Christians in tar and tie them to the trees in his gardens and set them afire to illuminate his way as he rode through the gardens. Roman soldiers would often put young Christians in leather bags and then add scorpions and poisonous snakes; tie the tops of the bags and toss them into the river or the sea. It was an agonizing death. The whole time they were demanding those people renounce their faith in Jesus. Antipas we are told by church history was the pastor of the church of Pergamum. We don’t know how he died. All we know is through some torture or some kind of persecution their pastor had been put to death because of his faith. And Jesus said, “I commend you for that.” Have you stopped lately to thank God we have the freedom to worship in America? At least to this point we do. You can come here on Sunday morning, and Sunday night, and Wednesday night you can come seven nights a week if you want to and you can worship God according to your own conscience and no one here is going to arrest you for doing that. You cannot understand what a great privilege it is unless you understand the terrible persecution the early Christians faced.

What would happen tonight if Arab terrorists broke down the back doors of this building and rushed in here with grenades and sub-machine-guns and they declared Holy Jihad—holy war—against us “infidels” and they lined all of us up against one wall of this room and pointed their machine-guns at us and they said, “Everyone who will renounce the name of Jesus may leave and everyone else will be shot!” What would you do? Let’s all collectively thank God that’s not going to happen. But I challenge you that if you said in your heart you would stand there and die for Jesus, then why is it that you won’t live for him on Monday and Tuesday and lift up his name? You’d be willing to die or you willing to live?

III. THE PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH

1. Balaam—Worldliness

But number three, he says there are some problems in this church. He says, “I need to point them out to you.” Look at verse 14 he says, “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you.” then, he names two problems in the church. “You have people there who hold to the teaching of the doctrine of Balaam.” That word *doctrine* can be summarized in the word, “worldliness.” What is worldliness? It is the mistake and the problem Balaam committed in the Old Testament. If you want to read about Balaam, go to the Old Testament. The children of Israel were coming out of Egypt on their way to the Promised Land and there was a king in Moab named Balak. And Balak had heard this Israeli army had been wiping out everybody they had encountered so, Balak said, “I need a little, extra help.” He heard there was a prophet; he wasn’t a Jewish prophet, he was a Gentile prophet but, he knew God and God talked to him and he talked to God. So, Balak said, “Balaam, come to Moab, because I want you to pronounce a curse upon this Israeli army because if you don’t, they are going to beat us.” Balaam said, “What’s it worth to you?” Balak said, “You name the price.” Balaam asked God “Should I go and do this?” God said, “No, these are my people. Don’t you dare curse them!” but Balaam started thinking about all that money. He started thinking about how his bank account would swell beyond what he would ever need. This is the one big hit! The only one he would ever need in his whole life and he would be financially secure from now on—wealthy, beyond reason—and so he compromised. He tried to obey God in one sense and he tried to obey Balak in the other sense and he stood with one foot in the world and one foot trying to do God’s word and he got into trouble. He went to Moab and instead of cursing the Israeli army, he prayed for them. Yet God said, “Balaam, that’s not enough. You’ve already betrayed me by coming over here and taking his money,” which he did. In the New Testament Balaam is always seen as a greedy man who tried to live with one foot in the world and one foot obeying God and that’s worldliness. The Bible says, “Love not the world nor the things in the world.” What that means is people were trying to live any way they wanted to and still say, “God, I love you.”

Do you think there is anyone who here today who does whatever they want to on a Friday or Saturday night, then they come to church on Sunday and sing all these hymns to God and does it without a wounded conscience? I think sometimes we make liars out of ourselves by the hymns we sing. You cannot sing, “There is no other way but the way of the cross” unless you are willing to bid farewell to the ways of the world, which is in that song. You cannot sing that you’ll take your stand beneath the cross of Jesus unless you can sing that you are content to let the world go by. You cannot sing that you want to survey the wondrous cross and not be willing

to sacrifice the vain things that charm me most. You cannot sing, "My Jesus, I love thee." and really mean it until you say with all your heart, "For him all the follies of sin I resign."

The people in the church at Pergamum were practicing the teaching of Balaam: Live anyway you want to during the week show up in church on Sunday and everything's okay. Don't think for one minute this promiscuousness we have in our society today is anything new. We talk about "the new morality." it's not "the new morality" it's just "the old immorality" that's always been around.

For instance this is the setting in which they ministered. Demosthenes was a well-known Greek orator. He was the guy who couldn't talk very well so he filled his mouth with rocks and stood at the seashore and talked and learned to pronounce well and loud and he took the rocks out of his mouth one at a time until he became a great speaker. I heard Dr. R. G. Lee say, "That's how you make a preacher. You get a guy and you fill his mouth full of marbles and he speaks. Then one at a time he takes all the marbles out and when he loses all his marbles he's a preacher."

Demosthenes said, "We have prostitutes for the sake of pleasure. We have mistresses for the sake of daily co-habitation and we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian of our household affairs." If you're not familiar with that kind of attitude just tune in to some of those soap operas during the day just tune in to some of the television shows are on at night. "It's okay if you not married! That's just an option." That attitude was around when this church existed and that attitude is around today. Worldliness was Balaam's problem. He said, "You can live like that and still be a Christian." You cannot! God says, "Be holy even as I am holy." So Balaam was the first problem.

2. Nicolaitans—Organization: They denied the "priesthood of believers"

The second was their problem with the Nicolaitans, the way the church was organized. Most of you know a Greek word and don't even realize it. It is the word, "Nike." Do you wear Nike tennis shoes? *Nike* means "to rule over, conquer." This word, Nicolaitans, we've talked about before means to conquer or to rule over the people. There was a problem that developed in the early church and was not corrected until the Reformation in the 16th century and it still hasn't been corrected thoroughly. It is a division that developed within the church or organization. This is the dangerous division that developed. The division developed that there were two kinds of people in the church there were the clergy and there were the people and the clergy had special rights and authorities and responsibilities the poor people didn't have. These people who had been ordained were the only ones who could forgive sin, collect indulgences or pray someone out of purgatory. They were the only ones who could do certain things and the poor people down here couldn't.

I'm here to tell you that organization is not from the New Testament. This idea of different kinds of Christians is not from the Bible. We believe in what we call the "priesthood of the believers," meaning the foot of the cross is level. We are all equal in God's eyes. God has gifted each one of us differently. God has gifted me and called me to be your pastor, your teacher. God has gifted some of you to be leaders in the church, others of you to be servants in the church. That's just our spiritual gifts. It has nothing to do with any kind of ranking. This idea that there are some people who are more important and more spiritually privileged than others is the doctrine of the

Nicolaitans. I want you to see what Jesus says about this doctrine, and he doesn't pull any punches. “Likewise you have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent, therefore!” Look back at verse 6 in chapter 2. The church at Ephesus had the same problem. He says, “You have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans.” Jesus said, “I also hate it.” That's pretty strong language, isn't it? Jesus says, “I hate that kind of distinction in the church.” So they had some problems.

IV. THE PROMISE TO THE CHURCH

1. Hidden manna

The final thing is the two promises Jesus makes to the church. “To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna.” In the Old Testament, the children of Israel had nothing to eat so God miraculously showered down this foodstuff down every morning, and when they got up, it was there on the ground. I call it, “sanctified Frosted Flakes,” because the Bible describes it as small, round, flaky-like materials that were sweet to the taste. He said, “Go out and get all you want. But you have to eat it all that day.” Yesterday's manna is no good. It always spoiled and rotted. So every day they had to go out and get more except on the Sabbath. On the Sabbath it was preserved all the way to the next day. There is a great lesson there. Every day you must spend time alone with the Lord. Yesterday's devotion is already spoiled. And today you must seek God and be fed by him. That's the great teaching of manna.

The Bible also says there was a pot of manna put in the Ark of the Covenant and when the Babylonians overran the temple in Jerusalem, they stole the Ark of the Covenant and it has never been seen since. But the Bible says the prophet Jeremiah went in and took that container of manna and hid it in Jerusalem—and it's never been seen since. The Jews believe when the Messiah came the way he would prove he was the Messiah and would find the hidden manna and say, “Here it is!” but they've got it all wrong. That manna has been spoiled for a long time. Jesus is saying, “Don't miss it! If you will be faithful to me, I will feed you daily spiritually if you hunger and thirst after righteousness, I'll see that you're filled.” Do you have a spiritual thirst and a spiritual hunger? Jesus says, “If you'll be faithful, I promise I will give you all the manna you need.”

2. White stone: To signify friendship

Then he said, “I promise that I'll give you a white stone and on that stone will be written a name that no one knows except him who receives it.” In biblical times they had a very interesting practice, like our practice of becoming blood brothers. In those days, they took thin, flat, white stone and two people who wanted to be like family took the stone and wrote a name on it only that other person knew maybe a nickname or a special affectionate, intimate name and then after they wrote those two names on that flat stone, they broke it. Like if Mike wrote his nickname on his, he would give it to me and if I had written my special secret name only he knew on it, I would give it to him. I would keep that stone with me and he would keep that stone with him. Did you know that on that white stone was all that I owned and all that I possessed and all that I was? Mike could have gone to my home and he could have shown that stone to my family and my family would accept him just as they would accept me. Isn't that a beautiful practice? Jesus says,

“Listen that’s what I’ll do for you.” He says, “I’ll be so close to you, I’ll know you so dearly and so intimately that it will be like we are brothers like we are closest friends and I’ll give you a name that you will know me so well that nobody else can know me the way that you know me.” Jesus says, “I’ll feed you and I will have such an intimate relationship with you that no one else on earth will have one exactly like it. I’ll give you a white stone.”

So he says to this church, “You folks better repent.” Today I ask you this question “Have you been faithful to God? Are you willing for him to feed you with that manna? To give you that white stone? Do you really want to know him intimately? If you do he’ll reveal himself to you!

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