

The Seven Letters of Highly Effective Churches – Pergamum

18th Sunday after Pentecost

October 4, 2009

We're continuing with our series today by taking a look at the third church mentioned in Revelation – Pergamum. I invite you to open your Bibles and turn with me to Revelation Chapter 2, starting at verse 12.

As is our pattern, let's set the context. Pergamum was another very wealthy city in modern-day Turkey. Aaaaand... stop. Isn't it interesting that so far all of these cities where wealthy, important cities? Does this say anything about the way wealth – either monetary wealth or wealth in traditions and practices – can hinder, can get in the way, of the full worship of Jesus?

In any event, Pergamum was a wealthy city and actually vied with Ephesus and Smyrna (the two we've talked about the past couple of weeks) for the coveted prize of being the top-dog city in Asia. Jesus called Pergamum the throne of Satan, and with good reason.

Pergamum had no less than at least four temples devoted to worshipping various gods. One of the temples was dedicated to a snake-god, and the people who went there actually worshipped snakes and prayed to the snake-god for healing. In addition to the temples, Pergamum also had the largest library of the time – 200,000 volumes of written material. Now all of these volumes had nothing to do with Jewish or Christian writings, but rather writings about philosophies, gods and goddesses, the latest and greatest scientific discoveries and findings, and on and on. Not only that, Pergamum had a booming business in the greatest new 'thing' at that time – manufacturing parchment.

To top it all off, Pergamum was also a big place for emperor worship, and the very first shrine had been built there to worship the Roman Emperors. That shrine was a place of worship for Emperor Augustus – as in Caesar Augustus; the Emperor who was ruling the empire at the time of Christ's birth.

And in the middle of this all, were the Christians – the outlawed, hated Christians who were considered backwards in their thinking, and even were accused of being cannibals for eating and drinking the body and blood of their God.

I can't help but think again how similar these cities are to us today. Massachusetts boasts of having the largest number of colleges to study the latest and greatest in science and philosophy and literature and on and on and on. We have very wealthy cities and people who are full of pride because of where they live and where they work. There are so many opportunities open to us, but are they really any good? You can make a note of Galatians 5:13 in the margins of your Bibles, "*You... were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.*"

That's the problem the Christians at Pergamum found themselves in, and that's what they were rebuked for. They had their freedom in Christ, but instead of living within the boundaries of that freedom, they were indulging their sinful nature. This was happening to such an extent that the one person who actually stood up for Christ and would not compromise, Antipas, was put to death. Don't miss this – the ONE person out of all the Christians in Pergamum who said 'no' to giving in and compromising on unchangeable truths was killed for it (ancient writings say he was burned alive at the stake). Where were the rest of the Christians? In other words, why was there only one person in this church Jesus called a friend for clinging to His name and the unchanging truth He brought?

Compromise with worldly morality and pagan doctrine was prevalent in the church and the result was Biblical faith soon became corrupted. You see, there was a group in the church that said, "There is nothing wrong with being friendly to Rome. What harm is there in putting a pinch of incense on the altar and affirming your loyalty to Caesar?" Antipas refused to compromise and was martyred; but others took the "easy way" and cooperated with Rome.

Jesus also has it against them that they hold to the practices of the Nicolaitans and Balaam. You may remember from our look at the letter to the church in the city of Ephesus, the Nicolaitans were people who called themselves Christians, but said there was no need for the Law which tells us about sin and so points us to the Savior. They lead Christians to abandon the Law and engage in any and all kinds of sinfulness, especially sexual sin. They said in order to master sensuality, one must know the whole range of it by experience; and that they should abandon themselves without reserve to the lusts of the body. The church in Ephesus was praised for kicking the Nicolaitans out, and the church in Pergamum is condemned for accepting them as well as those who follow the same line of thinking as Balaam – compromise with the world and giving into sinfulness. You can read Numbers chapters 22 – 25 to find out more about Balaam.

Here's another note you can make in your Bibles: the word *Pergamum* means "married." What's the big deal with that? The church is 'married' to Jesus. We are married to the one who saved us. As such, we don't cheat on Him by turning our back on what He says. You can also make a note of 2 Corinthians 11:3-4: *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.*

Do we do that? Do we cheat on our groom by 'putting up with' the things of this world just to get along, even if what we are putting up with is vastly different from what Jesus tells us in His word? Do we say the same things the group in this church said, "There's nothing wrong with being friendly to the world. What harm is there in just giving in a little here and there?"

What's wrong is what Jesus says – “Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” Repent. Change your ways and come back to Me, Jesus says. Come back to Me, and be saved. Come out of the world and come back to Me – to my love, to My forgiveness, to the home I've been preparing for You.

Law.

Don't ever let anyone tell you Jesus does not talk about the Law. He does all over the Bible. He also talks about the Gospel.

“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.”

What's the hidden Manna? Write John 6:30-35 in the margins of your Bibles next to this verse: *So they asked him, “What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” “Sir,” they said, “from now on give us this bread.” Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life.*

Why is it hidden? Because He's in Heaven! But listen! He's coming back, and this is yet another promise from Him about the second coming of Christ. In order to give the 'hidden manna', He has to bring it to us – He has to bring *Himself* to us. That means He's coming back! And on that day every eye will see and every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!

For some it will be too late. They had their chance in this life, but rejected it. But those who overcame, those who clung to the faith, receive a white stone with a new name.

A white stone. There's a few different ideas out there on what this means, but I think the one that makes the most sense is that this stone refers to judgment. You see, in that time when people – a.k.a.: juries – would judge people, they would cast their verdicts with rocks. Black rocks meant guilt, white rocks meant innocence.

Those who overcome, those who do not give in, those who do not compromise, those who refused to take part of the fallen world's way of thinking, receive a white stone, judging them as forgiven in Jesus; innocent in the eyes of their Lord. A pure bride presented to her husband on the day He comes to take her Home.

I can't help but wonder at the new name. As we've talked about many times in our Adult Discussions, names in the Bible were so important. Abram's name was changed to Abraham, Simon to Peter, Saul to Paul, even the Disciple John had a name-change of sorts: he went from

being a Boanerges – a ‘son of thunder’ – to the Disciple Jesus loved, his life now hidden in Christ.

What will our new names be? “Faithful?” “Beloved?” “Steadfast?” Maybe it won’t be a new individual name for those who didn’t give in, but rather the Divine Name of God confirming His acceptance and forgiveness and love of His children. The saints who overcame the world; the bride who stayed true to her husband; the friends of Jesus like Antipas, who was willing to lose everything, even his own life, rather than give in and compromise what Jesus said.

The first lesson for a highly effective church was love Jesus for who He is and what He’s called us to.

The second lesson for a highly effective church was don’t compromise.

This third lesson for a highly effective church continues the theme of not compromising. It’s simply this: overcome the world.

Overcome the desire to give in, to compromise, to be friends with the world.

“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.”

What will your new name be? I can’t wait to hear mine!

Would you pray with me please?

Jesus, thank You again for these letters You dictated to the churches in the book of Revelation. Thank You for loving them enough to call them out on their sin, and give them correction. Thank You that we have these letters today to read, to apply and to grow from.

Jesus, when we are honest, we have to admit that it is simply easier to do what those at Pergamum were doing, and just compromise a little here and there to be friends with the world. Help us to never do that. Holy Spirit, give us the faith and the courage to stand firm on Your unchanging timeless truths. Help us to be like Antipas, ready to die rather than negate Your Word. Help us to be a pure bride, a white stone of innocence, a friend of Yours, Jesus.

In Your name we pray it,

Amen

