

VISION OF JESUS — VIEW OF HIS CHURCH

7. His View of Pergamum: The Morally Compromised Church

Revelation 2:12-17

Revelation 2:12–17 (ESV) ¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. ¹³“ ‘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. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷He 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.’

REVIEW

This morning we are in our 7th installment of our study of the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation titled: “A Vision of Jesus — His View of the Church.”

At the close of the 1st century the Roman government banished the apostle John to the isle of Patmos *for preaching the word of God and for his testimony about Jesus*. John was old and alone on a rock in the middle of the ocean the very old apostle John when he was given a vision of Jesus. Then Jesus told John

Revelation 1:11 (ESV) ¹¹.... “Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”

That vision of Jesus would be crucial to everything Jesus was going to say to each of these seven churches that existed in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) at the end of the first century.

It is absolutely crucial for us to remember that each of those 1st century churches possessed strengths and weaknesses **common** to **all** of the churches in the **decades, centuries** and **millennia** that followed. **That means** that the words of Jesus to those 1st century churches (and the individuals within those churches) are **prophetic!** They carry **wisdom** and **application** for **all** churches throughout history **until** Jesus comes again.

We need to hear those words of Jesus to those seven 1st century churches for what they are: They are the **living** — **powerful** and **enduring** Word of God They're a **divine diagnostic** by which every church in every age can discern their true spiritual condition.

Each of these seven letters **begins** with Jesus introducing Himself by way of a specific element of His nature and attributes that John saw in his vision of Jesus in **Revelation 1:13-16**. That specific element of Christ's nature speaks to the specific **NEED** and **CONDITION** of the church in Smyrna. **Jesus will then** tell them that **He knows them** — tell them how He sees them — and then He will tell **how** to live in light of who He is. B y the way — *that* is a simple definition of what it means to be a Christian, A Christian is someone who **thinks** and **lives** in light of who Jesus is! **TUCK THAT AWAY** — it is a **HUGE** component of what Jesus is going to say to the church in Pergamum.

It is so important that we see the heart of Jesus in these letters! He wrote these letters to **comfort** these churches because they were living in difficult circumstances. Those first century Christians faced opposition and persecution because they were followers of Jesus. As our country is becoming increasingly more hostile to the Gospel we need to step back to get a sense of perspective.

Alistair Begg (Brave by Faith) — *“For a few hundred years in the West we have been able to kid ourselves that the normal experience of God’s people is to be considered respectable and honorable, to be able to voice our views in the public square and be welcomed, and to be able to speak to those in power and be listened to. It was not ever thus, and it is no longer thus. We are back to the normal experience of the church: facing opposition and being called to stand firm and undergo suffering for our faith.”*

He also wanted to **commend** them in the areas where they were doing well. He wanted to **console** them when they suffered loss because of following Him. He also wanted to **correct** them. Pergamum was one of the churches that He needed to correct. We need to remember that the things Jesus had to say to these specific churches were also written for us and to us as well because each of those first century churches possessed strengths and weaknesses common to all of the churches in the decades, centuries and millennia that followed.

As He speaks to them he reminds that that He truly KNOWS them — He truly KNOWS the situations they're in. In John's vision of Jesus in [Chapter 1](#)

Revelation 1:14 His eyes were like a flame of fire.

Jesus has penetrating insight — He sees through everything. We need to remember that there is nothing hidden from Him; *Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes (Heb. 4:13)*. He sees the secret places of our lives; the hidden places that no one else can see. He even knows our thoughts, our motives and our intentions.

He KNOWS — and he KNOWS in a loving way. That's an awesome thing to consider. Have you ever been in the midst of a really difficult thing and someone comes up to you and says, "I know exactly how you feel"? Sometimes you're thinking, *"Please shut up — you have NO idea what I'm going through."* But when someone really does KNOW what you're going through — and they want to just be with you in your suffering — that is awesome.

JESUS is the One who truly KNOWS. He is God who stepped fully into our humanity. He KNOWS by experience the weight and the pain of life in our broken world. He truly KNOWS what we struggle with.

So, in His desire to comfort, commend, console and correct each of these churches He says to each of them "I KNOW."

In our last study we came to the letter of Jesus to the church in Smyrna — the suffering church. Jesus told the suffering church of Smyrna that HE KNEW their "tribulation" — literally, *I know the crushing pressure that you are experiencing as you seek to follow me in an environment that is totally hostile to Me, My word,*

and My ways. Jesus can truly say: I know what it is like to be rejected by culture; I know what it's like for people to cry out "Kill him!" Jesus consoles them with that knowledge. In all of their sufferings the one who was despised and rejected of men was with them.

As we come to the third of these seven churches, Pergamum, Jesus tells them what He KNOWS about them — *Verse 13 I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is*. He wants THEM to know that HE KNOWS the space that they occupy as they are living on mission for Him between the already and the not yet — and He knows it is *intense*.

DON'T MISS THIS — The Bible is says consistently and with clarity that Satan is real and he is at work in the world. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in the seventh book of an eight volume commentary of the book of Ephesians (The Christian Warfare) made this observation

"I am certain that one of the main causes of the ill-state of the church today lies in the fact that the devil is being forgotten"¹

The Scriptures make it clear that clear that Satan is not the equal but opposite of God. He is a created being — so he is not omnipresent as God is. It might seem he is, as he has minions of fallen angels who joined him in his rebellion against God — and they are active as his agents in our fallen world to oppose Jesus and His redeeming plans and purposes *in* and *through* the citizens of His Kingdom.

Jesus wants to comfort church in Pergamum by telling them that He KNOWS that they are living *where Satan's throne is*. We don't know if by that Jesus meant that at the end of the first century Pergamum was the very center of Satan's activity in the world — or if this is figurative language — using the idea of the throne to speak of power and authority: *I KNOW you guys are living in a city and a space where Satan exercises tremendous power — has a lot of sway — a lot of authority*. Either way — Jesus is saying: *I get where you are. I KNOW that you face blatant, demonic, radical opposition to the truth*.

¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones; The Christian Warfare, page 292

DON'T MISS THIS — At the heart of this letter is the issue of living out the magnificent truth of the Gospel where it isn't popular — where it is radically opposed.

NOTICE what Jesus doesn't say: He doesn't say, "I know where you dwell — so just bail — move to Montana where it's not so gnarly!" In his book "*Brave by Faith*" Alistair Begg frames it like this: *we will be tempted to make a run for it, to circle the wagons and isolate ourselves, or to stand outside of our culture and shout at it.*²

Jesus wants them to continue in the truth. This connects so beautifully with last Sunday's study in John 8 — *if you **continue** in — **dwell** in My words — make My words your home — you will be my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*

The church in Pergamum is SO incredibly relevant to *this* local church called Metro and every local church in *this* culture.

REMEMBER — the amazing vision of Jesus in [Revelation 1](#) is crucial. Jesus revealed the condition and need of each of these churches in light of who He is! The main focus of this letter is TRUTH. I say that because of the way Jesus identifies Himself in this letter.

Revelation 2:12 (ESV) ¹²“**And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.**

We're taken back to

Revelation 1:16 (ESV) ¹⁶.... *from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword.*

In the book of Ephesians and the book of Hebrews we're told what this two edged sword is.

Ephesians 6:17 (ESV) ¹⁷ *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,*

² Alistair Begg. "Brave by Faith."

Hebrews 4:12 (ESV) ¹²For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

As we look at His letter to the church in Ephesus we see that Jesus is concerned that we **love Him first and most**. As we look at His letter to the church in Smyrna we see that Jesus is concerned that we **endure suffering** for His name's sake faithfully. Now, in His letter to the church in Pergamum we see that Jesus is concerned that **cling to the truth without wavering and without compromise**.

The problem in Pergamum is that they were getting the doctrine of Jesus right, but they were **not** getting the implications of how they were supposed to live in light of who Jesus is. They had right belief — ORTHODOXY. But they didn't have right practice — ORTHOPRAXY. They had good, strong Christian doctrine; but they were morally compromised.

HERE'S THE POINT — What we believe to be true about Jesus should SHAPE and INFORM the way we live in an immoral culture. Remember: A Christian is someone who lives and thinks in light of who Jesus is.

The letter of Jesus to the church in Pergamum zeroes in on two massive truths: **1.** The truth about Himself. **2.** The truth about holiness.

Revelation 2:13 (ESV) ¹³“ 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.

my name — Anytime the Bible speaks of the Name of God or the Name of Jesus it is talking about His character, His essence, the truth about Him, His glory **and**.... His reputation!

you hold fast my name — My character, My essence, My glory, My reputation — you're holding on to that.

and you did not deny my faith — the truth about His death on the cross for our sins — His resurrection from the dead — THE GOSPEL. They were would not deny those things in a time and a place that was difficult to hold them.

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.

In our study of the letter of Jesus to the church in Smyrna we learned about the reality of Caesar worship. Once every year everyone in the Roman empire had to say, “Caesar is Lord” and then burn a pinch of incense on the altar dedicated to Caesar. But those first century Christians believed that only Jesus is Lord. Push came to shove in Pergamum. The Roman government tried to force this man Antipas to say, “Caesar is Lord”. But He said “I won’t ascribe that glory and reputation and saving work of Jesus to anyone but Jesus. I pray we never forget that *THAT* is still happening to brothers and sisters in Christ around the world.

So, Jesus commends them for holding to RIGHT BELIEF in Him. They would not budge on the non-negotiables of the Christian faith. They would not compromise on the unique identity and work of Jesus

BUT HERE’S THE DEAL — The way we LIVE communicates to fallen culture who Jesus is. I’ve said this a on a number of occasions: You and I are the only Bible some people will ever read. For some people, what they think about Jesus will be formed by what they see in our lives. That’s a hard bit of business. On the one hand that is a terrifying responsibility — but it’s also a glorious calling and privilege. God in His love has called us to be His ambassadors.

I NEED YOU TO HEAR ME — I NEED TO HEAR ME: Being His ambassadors in this world doesn’t just involve what we say about Him; it involves the way we live for Him in light of all He has done for us. A good friend of mine said it like this: OUR lives are connected to HIS reputation.

JESUS CARES about His reputation. Think about it: We care about our reputations — and we’re often a mess. Jesus — the glorious One — cares about His reputation because HE is the only way anyone can be saved.

I’m not just preaching to you here — I’m preaching to myself here. **Jesus cares** about His reputation. The way you and I live proves whether or not **you and I care** about His reputation.

THAT was a problem within the church of Pergamum. Jesus commends them for the truth they believed about Him — but now He is going to correct them for not getting the truth about holiness.

Revelation 2:14-15 (ESV) ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

SOME in the church who were making light of sin — they compromised in the realm of sexual immorality. They weren't just doing it themselves — they were teaching others in the church to compromise in the realm of sexual immorality — hence the “doctrine of Balaam” and “teaching of the Nicolaitans”.

We meet this guy Balaam in **Numbers 22-25**. Balaam is an enigma! He was a prophet from Mesopotamia (Pethor) who suddenly appears in the narrative of Israel's history when they were still wandering in the wilderness on the east side of the Jordan river. During that time God gave the Israelites victory over the people groups of that region. In **Numbers 22** they are camped out on the east side of the Jordan opposite Jericho. The Moabites were there. Balak, who was the son of the king of the Midianites, saw that the God of the Israelites was giving them victory after victory over the surrounding people groups. Balak was terrified. So, he sent for this prophet named Balaam and told him that he would make him rich if he would pronounce a curse on the Israelites. Balaam agreed. But every time Balaam went to pronounce a curse on the Israelites — God overruled and instead he pronounced a blessing. In fact, Balaam actually pronounced one of the most amazing Messianic promises (Numbers 24:17). That happened three times and Balak lost his mind! Balaam told Balak, *“I can't curse these people, but I know how you can get God to judge them. I can't take away the COVERING of God that is over them — but I can get them to come out from beneath it!”* He suggested to Balak to send Moabite girls into the camp of the Israelites to seduce the men of Israel into worshipping their idols — worship that was expressed sexually.

The men of Israel were seduced. They worshipped Baal; committed sexual sin and 24,000 Israelite men died.

So, Balaam becomes a type of those who make light of sin. And the judgment of God in the book of Numbers reminds us that God doesn't make light of sin — even when we do; even when all of culture does; even when part of the church does.

THAT is what is going on in the text — and we see that Jesus is SERIOUS about holiness. Jesus is SERIOUS about sexual sin in the church. He says, “I have something against you” — and by referencing Balaam He speaks directly to the way the church in Pergamum gave in to the prevailing winds of culture concerning sexual sin. This is SO crucial for every church in 2021 as we face the tsunami of sexual immorality.

Here’s what culture at large — and many within church culture do when it comes to sexual immorality (sex outside of marriage, same-sex sexual sin, adultery). People tend to think that is an outdated morality. They say that the sexual ethics of Scripture might have made sense to people in the time of the Bible because they were less educated, unsophisticated cultures. But we live in a totally different time and we now understand that those things are totally acceptable.

We need to understand that 21st century culture is not the first culture to applaud what God calls sinful sexual behavior. It goes all the way back to before the flood in Genesis 6. It goes all the way back to the time of Abraham. In fact, the culture that Jesus was speaking to in the book of Revelation was more sexually corrupt than ours! The worship of idols was prolific, and the main way they worshipped those idols was through sacrifice and illicit sex that included prostitution and homosexuality.

We can know that a god is invented by man when the way that god wants to be worshipped is by illicit sex. In contrast to idolatry the Creator God designed sex to be enjoyed in the context of a lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual relationship. And He has made it clear that sexual behavior outside of that is destructive.

DON’T MISS THIS — As ridiculous as that might sound to 21st century culture — it sounded even more ridiculous in 1st century Pergamum where Satan’s throne was. William Barclay gives us these words of the Roman statesman Cicero (a contemporary of Julius Caser and Marc Antony) said about this.

“If there is anyone who thinks that young men should be absolutely forbidden the love of courtesans (upper class prostitutes), he is extremely severe. I am not able to deny the principle he states. But he is at variance, not only with the license of what our own age allows, but also with the customs and concessions of our ancestors. When indeed was this not done? When did anyone ever find

*fault with it? When was such permission denied? When was it that that which is now lawful was not lawful?"*³

That sounds like it could have been written in any popular newspaper or magazine of OUR day — or written in the script of a TV show or movie of OUR day.

Listen to what God said about the sexual ethos of His kingdom

1 Thessalonians 4:1–8 (ESV) *¹Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³**For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷**For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.*****

God is saying, *“I know what fallen man is saying; I know what fallen culture is saying; I know what Pergamum is saying; I know what Placer County is saying — but THIS is my will for your life!”*

God wants HOLINESS for our lives because He wants WHOLENESS for our lives. Sexual sin always brings brokenness — to individuals; to couples, to a community; to culture at large.

The citizens of the Kingdom of God are called to an entirely different standard. The flow of culture outside of the Kingdom of God is going to say, *“How outdated; how old fashioned; how closeminded; how bigoted, how unfair, how on the wrong side of history are you?!”*

THAT was the situation Jesus was speaking to in Pergamum

³ William Barclay, *Letter to the Seven Churches* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 40.

Let's look at another passage

1 Corinthians 6:9–11 (ESV) ⁹*Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.*

There's no eternal life for them! There's a big chunk of church culture that is trying to say that THAT verse doesn't apply to us in the 21st century.

¹¹*And such **were** some of you. **But** — you were **washed**, you were **sanctified**, you were **justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Verse 11 is so amazing — so awesome! Those things **were** true of you — **but** you have been washed and sanctified and justified because of what Jesus did by way of His sacrificial death and bodily resurrection — and **now** you have eternal life **now** you are in the Kingdom of God!

The problem in Pergamum is that there were men and women who believed the right things about Jesus but **still were** some of those things listed in verses **1 Corinthians 6:9-10**.

The teaching of the Bible tells us that right believe about Jesus leads to a transformation of behavior.

Philippians 2:13 (NLT) ¹³*For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.*

Again — **1 Corinthians 6:11**

*such **were** some of you. **But** — you were **washed**, you were **sanctified**, you were **justified***

In other words — if you call yourself a Christian those things should no longer describe you. But if they do — then you have a problem. And THAT was the problem with the church in Pergamum. They hadn't yet let their orthodoxy (their

right belief about who Jesus is — His glory, His love, His saving power) form and shape their attitude towards sin.

Jesus tells them what they need to do.

Revelation 2:16 (ESV) ¹⁶Therefore repent.

Stop living that way. You were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified. God's will for you is to *abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴that you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor*. That involves what you look at; who you sleep with (Get Sam Allberry's book: "Why Does God Care Who I sleep With). That involves what you believe about sexuality — even when culture is saying it's insane.

Revelation 2:16 (ESV) ¹⁶Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

THINK ABOUT THIS — Rome had a big sword in Pergamum. It took the life of that believer in Pergamum named Antipas. Figuratively — Rome has a big sword in 21st century culture. The issue is this: Whose sword do you fear more? The sword of culture or the sword of Jesus Christ?

It's hard to not cave to culture. It wields a big sword. You can be ostracized. In some cultures physically persecuted, even killed.

Jesus said, Repent, or I'm coming to you to make war with you. There are two ways Jesus makes war with the sword/ the truth of God's word.

1. In the life of the Christian the sword pricks our conscience. It wounds our pride that says (in regards to sexual sin and every other sin) — "I want my way, not God's way." It pierces the multiple ways we rationalize our sin. It exposes our motives. Jesus makes war with us by convicting us. It is actually a gift from God when Jesus makes war against us in that way **because** He cares about His glory and our good — and those two things are inextricably bound together. Repent is not a bad word — it's a beautiful word — **because** it is a word of God's love because it is in repentance that we find forgiveness.

Acts 3:19–20 (CSB) ¹⁹Therefore repent and turn back, so that your sins may be wiped out, ²⁰that seasons of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord....

Restoration to relationship with God.

The opposite of confession is hiding.

There's a second way that Jesus uses the sword — He uses it against those who refuse to repent in Judgment.

John 12:48 (CSB) ⁴⁸The one who rejects me and doesn't receive my sayings has this as his judge: The word I have spoken will judge him on the last day.

There is coming a **last day** when Jesus will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:13) and set right everything that was wrong.

The sword of Rome was something to be feared. But the Kingdom of Jesus is outlasts the kingdom of Rome. The Kingdom of Jesus is bigger than the kingdom of fallen culture.

Jesus died in our place for our sin and three days later rose from the grave so that we can have the forgiveness of sins and receive the gift of life — life from God and life with God that lasts forever in His everlasting Kingdom.

But we tend to fear Rome (if-you-would) — we fear what fallen culture thinks and what fallen culture can do to us. But Jesus says don't fear that! We need to stand in awe of the creator of the universe who is the sovereign judge of history and eternity.

QUESTION — Are there areas of my life where I am being informed and shaped by fallen culture — especially in the realm of sexuality — instead of being shaped and transformed by the truth of who Jesus is and the truth about His will for sexuality? Whose sword do we fear most?

God wants us to forsake sin and pursue godliness and holiness — and in that there's a great reward.

Revelation 2:17 (ESV) ¹⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers

The one who overcomes; sticks with Jesus to the end in the face of fallen culture.

I will give some of the hidden manna,

Jesus has something better than anything the world can offer. Manna was that food that the Lord provided for Israel during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

I believe this speaks to those deep areas of dissatisfaction in our lives that cause us to look to created things to be the source of validation and satisfaction — instead of looking to Jesus.

John 6:35 (NLT) ³⁵Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life.

Jesus said that He will satisfy us more than all the things we are so afraid to forsake.

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.'

I think that a lot of people engage in sex outside of marriage because they have a deep, unmet desire for intimacy. God's design is for that desire to be met in a lifelong, monogamous, heterosexual relationship. But that human relationship is pointing to the ultimate intimacy between Jesus and His bride — the church.

Anything He is calling you to forsake is not as valuable than the hidden manna and the white stone with the secret, intimate name on it.