

Lesson 10

Revelation 2:12-17

The Letter to Pergamum

12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges; 13 I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth. 14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. 15 So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. 16 Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone

**a new name written, which no man knoweth
saving he that receiveth it.**

Historically, Pergamum was the most famous city in Asia. It had been a capital city for 400 years. First, it was the capital of the Seleucid kingdom after Alexander the Great. Then it was the capital of the province of Asia that was formed by the Romans. It was located on a hilltop from which the Mediterranean Sea could be seen fifteen miles away.

It has been said that both history and nature marked Pergamum as a royal city. Here is how Ramsay described it:

No city of the whole of Asia Minor — so far as I have seen, and there are few of any importance which I have not seen — possesses the same imposing and dominating aspect. It is the one city of the land which forced from me the exclamation “A royal city!” ... There is something unique and overpowering in its effect, planted as it is on its magnificent hill, standing out boldly in the level plain, and dominating the valley and the mountains on the south.

Pergamum was a center of culture surpassing even Ephesus and Smyrna. It had a library that was second only to that in Alexandria, with 200,000 volumes copied by hand! The Roman general Marc Antony gave the library of Pergamum to his new wife, Cleopatra of Egypt, as a wedding gift. (Antony’s mentor, Julius Caesar, had burned the great library in Alexandria when Rome had invaded Egypt several years earlier.)

The word “parchment” is derived from the name “Pergamum.” In the third century BC, a Pergamene king attempted to lure away the librarian at Alexandria. The Egyptians imprisoned the librarian and banned the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Pergamum, in response, invented parchment (or vellum) from animal skins.

Pergamum was also a great religious center. The city contained a great altar to Zeus that was set 800 feet up on the side of a hill. The altar looked very much like a large throne. This altar may be what is called “Satan’s throne” in verse 13. What remains of that altar can be seen today in a museum in Berlin, where it was taken after being excavated by the Germans.

The city was also a center of Caesar worship. It was in Pergamum that the first Asian Temple for Augustus was built. That temple was for more than forty years the one center of the Imperial cult for the whole Province. I think this temple is a better choice for the identity of “Satan’s throne” in verse 13. Satan at this time was working through Rome, not through Zeus. Pergamum was a center of Roman opposition — which made it a center of Satan’s opposition. Verse 13 says that Satan dwelt there where his seat or throne was located — that tells us that Satan felt very much at home in Pergamum.

Roman governors were divided into two groups – those with the right of the sword and those without. The governor of Pergamum had that right, which meant he could execute Christians for any reason. And yet Christ in verse 12 refers to himself as the one with the sharp two-edged sword.

The Greek word translated “martyr” in verse 13 means “witness.” That Greek word did not come to mean “martyr” until New Testament times when being a “witness” for Jesus often invited a death sentence.

In verse 13, Jesus says that the Pergamum Christians “hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you.” Who was Antipas?

We don’t know anything more about him than what we read here. Later legendary accounts say that he was slowly roasted to death in a brazen bowl during the reign of Domitian, but we can’t put much weight on that. What we know about Antipas is all we need to know about him — Christ Jesus called him “my faithful witness.” When you have that on your headstone, nothing else matters!

In verse 16, we have yet another figurative **coming** in judgment, this time against the church in Pergamum should they fail to repent.

Jesus promises them a white stone in verse 17. What does that mean?

Stones were given to indicate a verdict at a trial, with a white stone denoting an innocent vote and a black stone denoting a guilty vote. Stones were also given as a reward for heroism or victory, as passes to enter the games, and sometimes exchanged between friends. Here it seems to indicate a reward or an indication of innocence or acquittal.

Also, in verse 17, Jesus says that there will be a new name written on the stone “which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.” What does that mean?

Later in 19:12, we will be told that Jesus has a name that no one knows, and yet that name is given in verses 13 and 16. Names in the Bible have a special significance. We know that names were often changed to indicate a change in status or circumstances, as for example with Abram and Jacob. To have a new name means to have a new situation. To have a name that no one else knows means that you have a status or a relation that no one else can share. Each of those is true of those who overcome the world by being faithful unto death.

But there is an additional significance to the new name in verse 17. As said earlier, Pergamum was the first city to build a temple to Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor and the adopted son of his great uncle, Julius Caesar. Prior to becoming the emperor of Rome, Augustus had a different name — Octavius. Here is how Ramsay describes that change of name:

[Augustus] had been a new name, deliberately devised by the Senate to designate the founder, and to mark the foundation of the new Empire: it was an old sacred word, used previously only in the language of the priests, and never applied to any human being. ... That old word was appropriated in 27 B.C. to the man who had been the saviour of Rome, and whom already the popular belief had begun to regard as an incarnation of the divine nature in human form, sent down to earth to end the period of war and introduce the age of peace. This sacred, divine name marked out the man to whom it was applied as one apart from the world, standing on a higher level, possessor of superhuman power in virtue of this new name and transmitting that power through the name to his descendants.

The people in Pergamum knew very well what it meant to be given a new name — and the promise here is that Jesus will give his faithful followers a new name. Just as Augustus had been set above the Roman world by his new name, God's faithful people would be set above the world by their new name. Once again, listen to Ramsay:

The Emperor is powerless: the supreme power and authority remain with the victorious Christian, who defeats the Emperor by virtue of the death which the Emperor inflicts. Here for the first time in the Seven Letters the absolute and inexorable opposition between the Church and the Imperial government is clearly expressed. It is not merely that the State persecutes the Church. The Church proscribes and sets itself above the Augus-

tan government. And this is done in the letter to the Church of that city where the Imperial government with the Imperial religion had placed its capital and its throne.

With that background, with that history, and with those promises, one might expect to find a unified church in Pergamum wholly devoted to Christ and his word, but sadly that was not the case. Verses 14-16 tells us that the church in Pergamum was locked in a battle between truth and error.

The Pergamum congregation had some within it who held to the false doctrine of Balaam and the false doctrine of the Nicolaitans. It is worthwhile noting that what was **hated** by the church in Ephesus was being **tolerated** by the church in Pergamum.

We have already talked about the Nicolaitan doctrine, and many commentators believe that the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans were one and the same. It is generally identified with the group mentioned in Jude 1 and alluded to in Romans 6.

***Jude 1:4,11** — For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. ... Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core.*

***Romans 6:1** — What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?*

This group was, it seems, promoting sin (fornication and the eating of meat sacrificed to idols) in the name of religion.

Why the reference here to Balaam? In Numbers 25, the Israelites played the harlot with the daughters of Moab, who then caused the Israelites to turn to false gods. Later in Numbers 31:16 we learn that these women, along with the Moabite king Balak, acted under the influence of Balaam.

One commentator wrote that “pagan women and pagan food were Balaam’s weapons against the rigid Mosaic code.” Balaam is a prototype of all corrupt teachers who betray believers into a fatal compromise with the world. Balaam worked from **within** to do what had not been possible to do from **without**.

Most likely these false teachers were Gnostics who claimed to have some secret knowledge from God — some special understanding that made them superior to those who did not possess that special knowledge. They no doubt thought of themselves as very spiritual — on a higher plane than the ordinary Christian. It is telling then that verse 17 promises hidden manna and a new name that no man knoweth. Jesus is telling the church that special understanding and knowledge come only from him, and it is a promise to all who overcome — not just to a select few.

These false teachers claimed to have special knowledge and deep spirituality, and yet they were wallowing in their sin. They were flaunting their sin.

That attitude remains with us to this very day. Those today who teach divorce and remarriage for any reason or who teach acceptance of homosexuality in the church claim to have a special understanding and a deeper spirituality than the rest of us. And yet I believe that Jesus' message to them is the same as the message here in verse 15 — “which thing I **hate**.”

Anyone who seeks to corrupt the Lord's church from within can be said to follow the doctrine of the Nicolaitans and the doctrine of Balaam — and this book is devoted to telling the church what Jesus will do to those who attack his body, the church — be it an attack from within or an attack from without.

Verse 15 has an important message for the church of any age: Jesus cares very deeply about the doctrine that is taught and proclaimed by his church. Jesus tells us in verse 15 that he **hates** this false doctrine that was being tolerated in Pergamum. If Jesus hates this false doctrine, then so must his church. We must not tolerate that which our Master hates.

A major theme of this letter and of the entire book of Revelation is compromise with the world. Caesar or Christ? Faithfulness or faithlessness? The world or the word?

Where are we most tempted to compromise? I think Martin Luther gave a good answer to that question:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the Devil are at that moment attacking, I am not **confessing** Christ, however boldly I may be **professing** Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is merely flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.

Where does the battle rage today? Where today are we most tempted to compromise?

The battles that were raging in Smyrna involved sacrifices to idols and fornication. Not much has changed — those are still the same battles that are raging today! The names of the idols may have changed, but people in the world are still making sacrifices to their false idols today — and Christians are still tempted to join in with them.

We are seeing examples of compromise in these letters, but the problem of compromise was not unique to the first century. It is a problem that has always and will always face the church in this world.

But there is one difference — many of the first century Christians who compromised did so under the threat of death. That did not excuse their compromise, but we can see the tremendous pressures that they faced. What pressures do we face today? Ridicule as a fundamentalist Bible thumper? Disdain for our failure to bow down before the altar of so-called “settled science,” as if science can ever be “settled”? If we compromise when faced with only that, what would we have done in the first century?

Compromise destroys our effectiveness. Jesus will not share his throne with Augustus or anyone or anything else that man might be tempted to elevate as god. And a compromising, easy-going Christianity is no Christianity at all. Such will never accomplish the great mission that has been given to those who wear the name of Christ.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. That is the only path for a child of God, and there is no compromise on that path — only faithfulness to our Lord and Savior. That is a central theme of this entire book.

One of the chief dangers facing the church in any age is the danger of **syncretism**. That word refers to the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought. Here is what Jesus thinks of syncretism:

***Matthew 6:24** — No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.*

Where do we see syncretism? We see it here among those who would seek to combine Christianity with Caesar worship. We see it later in the Catholic church, which to this day is a combination of the early church with the Roman

empire, with very little if any of the former remaining. We see it in theistic evolution, which seeks to combine God's word with the present day views of science falsely so-called.

Why is compromise so terrible? Why must compromise be avoided at all costs? Because syncretism is the result of compromise, and syncretism destroys the church — making it unrecognizable and ineffective.

At no time in the history of the church was syncretism a greater danger than in the first century, but it remains a great danger today as well. We must always be on guard against it, in whatever form it takes.

Let's look at a concrete example of modern-day compromise in the church: theistic evolution. Many today try to worship both at the altar of God and at the altar of science — they try to serve two masters. They have turned science into a false god, and they fall down at worship it.

Was Adam the first man or not?

1 Corinthians 15:45 — *And so it is written, The **first man Adam** was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.*

Were the creation days ordinary twenty-four hour days or not?

Exodus 20:11 — *For in **six days** the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed **the sabbath day**, and hallowed it.*

Is man the result of evolution or the result of creation?

Genesis 2:7 — *And **the Lord God formed man** of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*

There's a reason virtually no one in Christendom disagreed on these issues for almost two thousand years — the Bible could not be more clear on the issue of man's origin. The disagreement came when science was elevated to the god-head. That is when the compromise occurred.

The problem with that compromise though is that science is not in any position to play god — and those who treat it as such show how little they really know about science. Let me give you an example.

Isaac Newton is considered by many (including myself) to be the greatest scientist who ever lived, and his theory of gravity one of the greatest scientific discoveries of all time.

So should we treat the theory of gravity as a pronouncement from Mount Sinai? Hardly. Newton himself admitted he knew absolutely nothing about what gravity is or how it does what it does. Instead he famously said, “I feign no hypotheses,” although he said it in Latin (*Hypotheses non fingo*). His theory was based on two premises that are no longer considered true: absolute space and absolute time. And his so-called law of gravity is known now to apply only in limited circumstances having been replaced by Einstein’s theories.

If that’s how your god operates, you need a new god! No one will ever say, “Science: the same yesterday, today, and forever!”

The theory of evolution is no better, but is in fact much worse. Why? Because unlike Newton (who believed in God), evolution is driven not by scientific curiosity but by a completely atheistic mindset. The evolutionists know the answers before they ever ask the questions. Evolution is dogma, and if you don’t believe that just look at how touchy they get when you disagree with them!

Now enter the Christian. How should a Christian deal with a philosophy that is completely opposed to God and to God’s word? Paul told us.

2 Corinthians 10:4-5 — (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God.

But some do not follow that command. Instead, they compromise. They change the word to fit what they believe they see in the world. And some are very candid about it. Here is what one theistic evolutionist had to say:

Of necessity, this evolutionary effort will also mean that some of the teachings will be translated almost beyond recognition, just as our skin is so unlike that of our scaly reptilian ancestors. Then, too, some passages will have so little utility that they will disappear, just as the primate tail was lost within our lineage of apes.

He would have the word of God evolve right along with everything else in his evolutionary scheme! That is the worst sort of compromise!

Revelation 2:18-29

The Letter to Thyatira

18 And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write; These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass; 19 I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. 20 Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. 21 And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. 22 Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. 23 And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. 24 But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. 25 But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. 26 And he

that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: 27 And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. 28 And I will give him the morning star. 29 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

The least important of the seven cities got the longest letter. Here is how Ramsay describes the city:

It lies in an open, smiling vale, bordered by gently sloping hills, of moderate elevation, but sufficient to overshadow the vale. It possesses no proper acropolis, and the whole impression which the situation gives is of weakness, subjection and dependence. The most careless and casual observer could never take Thyatira for a ruling city, or the capital of an Empire.

We know less today about Thyatira than we do about the other cities in Revelation 2-3. Much of what we do know comes from the coinage of the day.

What little importance Thyatira had came from its location. It was on a road connecting Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Smyrna. That location made Thyatira a great commercial town. It was also *strategically* important because it was a gateway to Pergamum, the capital of the province.

Thyatira was a center of trade for dye and wool. Lydia, the seller of purple in Acts 16:14, came from Thyatira.

The city had a large number of trade guilds. In fact, Ramsay tells us that more trade-guilds are known in Thyatira than in any other Asian city.

These guilds held meals in the temples, where meat that had been offered to idols was served. Those at the meals often engaged in drunkenness and immorality. The Christians refused to participate and thus suffered commercially.

Lydia was almost certainly a member of one of these trade guilds, at least at some time in her past. Yet, again almost certainly, she must have left that guild after her conversion to Christ. We often speak of Lydia as an example of hos-

pitality and conversion, but if we were to hear the rest of the story I suspect we would see that Lydia was also an example of one who suffered greatly for Christ — perhaps losing her livelihood for his sake.

Thyatira had what Ephesus lacked. Verse 19 tells us that Thyatira rivaled Ephesus in busy Christian service, but it also tells us that Thyatira had the love that the Ephesians were lacking. In fact, Jesus tells them that their latest works exceeded their first works, which means that while Ephesus was backsliding, Thyatira was growing and maturing.

And yet verse 20 tells us that the church in Thyatira had a serious problem. There was a malignant cancer growing in the body, and they were permitting it to grow unchecked. Verse 19 tells us that they had been patient. Verse 20 tells us that perhaps they had been too patient!

The Ephesians could not bear false prophets, and yet they lacked love. Thyatira had love, but they tolerated false prophets. Neither group was right with Christ. We must always seek both love and truth, or we will eventually end up with neither.

Although the church in Thyatira faced some serious threats from without, this particular threat against the church in Thyatira came from within. There was always a temptation to put business interests ahead of Christ's interests, and apparently the false prophetess referred to in verse 20 as Jezebel wanted to compromise with the trade guilds by participating in their immorality and idolatry. And, worse, she was teaching and seducing Jesus' servants to do the same.

The confession of Caesar as lord was required before one could buy or sell. Some, no doubt, would compromise and make this confession for business reasons. Historians tell us that the slogan of those who compromised was "A man must live." You can imagine the rationalizations that must have gone on with some.

And yet the text implies that these compromisers saw themselves as deeply spiritual people. The "depths of Satan" in verse 24 is thought by many to refer to those who felt they had a duty to experience every kind of sin. Their goal was to wallow in sin yet keep their soul unaffected. And they could accomplish that feat, no doubt, because of what they saw as their own deep, deep spirituality. But their self-proclaimed spiritual **depth** was really spiritual **death**.

Jesus' judgment of this Jezebel is described in verses 22-23. The children in verse 23 are most likely her disciples. (Isaiah 57:3-8 seems to use the term in a

similar way.) Both she and her disciples will be judged. We have each been given a mind — it will be no excuse on that last great day to stand before Jesus and say that we were led astray by a false teacher. Those led astray here are being judged right along with the one who led them astray. Look at verse 23 — “I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.” That is personal responsibility — “every one of you.”

Verse 21 tells us that they were given the opportunity to repent, but they did not. If she continued in her sin, verse 22 says she would be cast into a bed, along with her followers, and suffer great tribulation.

Two points here: First, as we saw with Rome’s lust for blood, sometimes God’s judgment of a person is just to give that person more of what he or she wants. Rome wanted blood? God gave them a river full of blood. Jezebel wanted to commit fornication? God casts her into a bed. Second, Jezebel and her followers will suffer tribulation — but this is different from the tribulation the saints were suffering. Jezebel’s tribulation was a judgment from God. This is the same distinction that we see in the suffering described by Peter.

*1 Peter 4:15-16 — But let none of you **suffer** as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man **suffer** as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.*

In verse 20, Jesus says, “Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest... .” The RSV translates the verse this way: “But I have this against you, that you **tolerate**... .” The modern reader recoils at that sentence — how, they ask, can anyone be **too** tolerant? Tolerance, after all, has become the greatest virtue in our society.

We are told that we must tolerate everything today except intolerance. The United Nations Declaration on the Principles of Tolerance states that tolerance involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism. So, according to the UN, if you believe dogmatically in anything or if you believe anything is absolute, then you are intolerant and worthy of rebuke.

The world may see tolerance as the greatest virtue, but God does not see tolerance that way. We must never tolerate sin in the church or those who teach others to sin. If we do, then we fall under the condemnation of verse 20. As

Alexander Chase said, “the peak of tolerance is most readily achieved by those who are not burdened with convictions.”

We see in these verses how Jesus views tolerance, and not surprisingly it is quite different from how tolerance is viewed by the world. The church of Christ must be intolerant whenever Christ is intolerant, and the Bible tells us what we must never tolerate.

We must not be tolerant with regard to departures from the word of God. The world may see tolerance as the greatest virtue, but Jesus does not share the world’s opinion. His first criticism of this congregation was that they tolerated a false prophetess.

Note that verse 23 says that Jesus’ message is a warning to **all** the churches. Again, we see that the messages in these letters apply to **all** congregations of the church.

The Christians in Thyatira were having a very tough time. They were being persecuted and driven out of business by the Romans, but at the same time they were being invaded by false teachers working against them from within. Yes, they were tolerating her, but perhaps that was just because they had so much on their plate. Verse 24 hints at that — Jesus tells them to take care of the problem, but in verse 24 he says, “I will put upon you none other burden.” Instead, they were told to just hold fast what they already had until Jesus came.

What does that phrase mean at the end of verse 25 — “**till I come**”? I think that question is answered in verse 26 — “And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works **unto the end**, to him will I give power over the nations.” This is not the end of all time; this is the end of **their** time. They were told hold fast until this day. They were to keep Jesus’ works until this day.

*Hebrews 4:10 — For he that is entered into his rest,
he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did
from his.*

Yes, we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ on the last great day — but we will know our eternal fate just a moment after we take our last breath. We are to remain faithful unto death. That was the message of Revelation 2:10, and I think that is the same message here in Revelation 2:25-26.