

Pergamum: Undiscerning Tolerance
Revelation 2:12-17
May 2, 2021
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Well, I encourage you to take your Bibles and turn with me to Revelation 2. We have begun our journey through this amazing book, the last book written in our New Testament, written in the mid 90's A.D. during the reign of Domitian. John exiled on the isle of Patmos, and there the Lord appears to him. And the Lord appears to him and begins to dictate to him the letter, the book, that we call Revelation. But He begins with a series of seven letters addressed to seven real churches in seven cities in Asia Minor in the first century. At the same time, those seven churches are representative of other churches that existed in the first century. Churches like them that had the same strengths, the same weaknesses. And they are equally representative of churches like them throughout church history, having their strengths, having their weaknesses. And so, there is so much for us to learn from these letters to the seven churches, as our Lord dictates each of them to the Apostle John.

Tonight we come to the third letter, the message to Pergamum. And Pergamum I've called the church of undiscerning tolerance. Nothing could be more appropriate for our times, I'm afraid, than the message to this church. Let's read it together, you follow along, Revelation 2 and I'll begin reading in verse 12,

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

The one who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent; or else I’m coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with

the sword of My mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.””

The message of this church is fairly straightforward. It’s this, Christ reminds His church that love for Him and love for His truth demands discernment, hatred of sin and error, and the faithful practice of church discipline. That’s what we’re going to see as this letter unfolds.

With each of the seven letters, we are following the same basic outline that our Lord does. And so, as we begin with this church, we begin with the introduction to the letter, the command to write, verse 12, ““And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this.”” Now, notice that it’s written to a church in a certain city. And so, we need to begin by looking at the character of that city, it’s the city of Pergamum. The city of Pergamum, here is a map that gives you an indication of where it is compared to the other of the seven churches. You can see it’s just off the Aegean Sea. If you had traveled north from Ephesus, it would be about 100 miles. But if you had travelled north from Smyrna, across the coastline about 40 miles and then turned inland toward the northeast, you would have traveled up the river valley of the Kaikos River, and there, 10 miles inland from the Aegean Sea, was the ancient city of Pergamum. Today nearby stands the modern Turkish city of Bergama.

Its name, Pergamum, means the citadel, and that’s because of how it was situated. Most of the seven cities were located at the base of a mountain or a hill down in the valley. But in the case of Pergamum, the entire city was built more than 1,000 feet above the valley floor and on the top of a cone shaped mountain. The city itself was a citadel, hence its name. You can see here, I’ll show you a couple pictures of the ancient remains of the city of Pergamum, here you can see some of the main architectural features looking up the mountain to where the city was located. I’ll mention several of these in a moment. Here is a view of the top of that hill and you can see some of the again, the remains, and the temple of Trajan for example, the library I’ll mention in a moment, the large theater, and others of the temples. And you can see the main road that was dotted by the stoa, the covered walkway that ran along the road up to the city.

Pliny, the Roman historian, called Pergamum, “By far the most distinguished city in Asia.” William Ramsey, the 19th century archaeologist, described the city like this, “Beyond all other sites in Asia minor, it gives the traveler the impression of a royal city, the home of authority. The rocky hill on which it stands is so huge and dominates the broad plain of the Kaikos river valley, proudly and boldly.” It was a city, even as you can see from these pictures of the ruins, that was filled with great buildings and temples. Today, its ruins include an amphitheater that seated over 10,000, built into the side of the mountain, with a spectacular view of the valley.

The city began in ancient history but came to prominence in its own region around 300 B.C. when it became the capital of the Attalid civilization. It’s the one that preceded the Romans. One of the kings of the Attalid civilization was a man named Eumenes. Eumenes the second made this city a shining example of Greek civilization. He created a library, a library that was second only to the historic library in Alexandria, Egypt. The library in Pergamum contained over 200,000 scrolls. There’s an interesting story that comes from the founding of the library, Ptolemy, down in Egypt, where the library of Alexandria was, heard rumors that Eumenes was creating this library and intended it to rival the one there. And so, when he heard that, he even heard that he had tried to hire away the famous librarian of Alexandria, a man named Aristophanes, so Ptolemy imprisoned Aristophanes and he ended all exports of papyrus to Pergamum. Papyrus was the primary paper of the ancient world. So Pergamum had to come up with a new paper, new writing material, and it landed with parchment, that is, making paper from animal skins. The technology had actually existed for more than 1,000 years, from Egypt, but they sort of rediscovered it, and the name for that writing material, parchment, became known as Pergamine. This library was so famous that Marc Anthony gave it to Cleopatra, who eventually moved all 200,000 of its scrolls to Alexandria.

The last Attalid king, Attalus the third, bequeathed his entire kingdom to Rome in the year 133 B.C. From that point forward Pergamum became the Roman capital of a new province that Rome created called Asia. We know it as Asia minor. And so Pergamum was the capital of this entire region. So it’s not surprising that Pergamum was the first city in that region to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a living emperor. This temple was built in 29 B.C., to “the divine Augustus and the goddess Rome.” The city served as a provincial capital and it’s where the Roman pro consul resided.

Now, the city also served as a center of worship for many of the Greek and Roman's gods. By far, the greatest centers of worship in the city of Pergamum were, first of all, for Zeus. The most spectacular of the city's temples was the temple of Zeus. It was situated on a jutting part of the hill over the valley and it contained the great altar of Zeus, an altar that was 112 feet by 120 feet. This photo that I have doesn't do justice to the sheer size of what that temple would have been. The altar that you see pictured there was in a colonnaded court that included a podium almost 18 feet high. If you ever go to Berlin, in the Pergamum Museum in Berlin, you can see a famous frieze that was around the base of this altar. Inscriptions throughout Pergamum describe Zeus as the *soter*, the savior.

The second major temple that was there was the temple of Asclepius. Asclepius was from their Anatolian heritage and he was the god of healing. He was represented by a serpent. And even today, the art of medicine, if you've seen the sort of insignia of medicine, the art of medicine is still represented by his staff intertwined with a serpent because of the connection of medicine to the temple of Asclepius. His temple was also one of the most famous ancient hospitals.

Here are a few pictures of that temple. And this is interesting because the way you entered the temple was through this covered passageway. And as you walk down the steps and into this corridor, you can see across the top there are holes in the hillside and that's so that the priest could, and there are different stories about how they treated you as you sort of entered the temple. Some said they shouted down positive things to encourage you. Others said they poured different things on you to, sort of, you know, get you moving, boiling water or cold water, those sorts of things. So there are different stories about how this was used, but this is what you walked through to get into the temple itself.

Now, the reason I show you this is because this temple was also one of the most famous ancient hospitals. Galen, one of the most famous doctors of the ancient world, second in fame only to Hippocrates, was born and grew up in Pergamum and studied and practiced in this temple. Now in this temple, or hospital, healing was attributed to god, the god of the temple, more than to the doctors. But the treatment consisted of a combination of medicine, psychology, and superstition. The prescription included things like exercise, massage, diet, rest, sun baths,

mineral baths, herbs, and purging. Some of you are, like, interested in going. It doesn't exist anymore, I just want you to know that.

Since the god himself was represented by a snake, non-poisonous snakes slithered all over the temple. And in fact, those who wish to be healed would lie down or, in many cases, sleep the night on the floor of the temple, hoping that they would be touched by one of the snakes which represented the god and be healed. For those who required a lengthy stay there was music, art, theater, and even religious services. One interesting side note, since Luke, who was a physician you remember, joined Paul on his second journey at the city of Troas, not far from Pergamum, it's possible Luke was living in this area. If so, it's possible, even likely, that before he came to Christ he practiced at this very hospital.

The third kind of religion that was prominent in Pergamum was emperor worship. Pergamum was especially known for the official worship center of the entire region of Asia Minor for emperor worship. In addition to the temple of the Emperor Augustus I mentioned a moment ago, there were also temples to Trajan. Here's a picture of Trajan's temple, it was a magnificent structure, as you can see even from the ruins. Here is sort of an inside shot of what those columns would have been like. And you can just picture the majesty of this structure. And there was another emperor who had a temple there as well, Septimius Severus.

Now in Smyrna, what we studied last week, Christians were in danger, you remember, on the day every year when citizens were supposed to offer their sacrifices to the emperor. Pergamum was known as the keeper of the temple of Caesar. So in Pergamum, a city filled with temples for the worship of the emperor, Christians were at risk every single day. Can you imagine now, if you can picture the majesty of this temple, there were two others to the emperor, you were required as a citizen to worship there, you can imagine how intimidating it would have been as an individual citizen to say, no, I'm not going to go there, I'm not going to worship the emperor, I'm not going to say Caesar is Lord.

So that's the city. That brings us to the history of the church. We've looked at the character of the city. Consider the history of the church. Verse 12 says, "to the angel of the church in Pergamum." Now, as true with the church in Smyrna, Acts doesn't record the founding of this church. However, it probably began during the nearly three years that Paul served in Ephesus.

Acts 19:10 again says that while he was there, “all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” So he used Ephesus as a sort of hub and center and from there spread to these other cities. It’s likely that this church was founded by the apostle Paul during those years.

That brings us then to the description of Christ in verse 12, notice how He introduces himself, ““The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this.”” Now as we have discovered occurs with all seven letters, Christ begins by referring to Himself using one of the pictures from the vision that John saw back in chapter 1. This one is in chapter 1 verse 16. This sword here described is a large Thracian sword typically wielded with great sweeping blows. It’s sharp and notice it has cutting surfaces on both sides. It’s interesting that He chose this emblem for His description of Himself to the city of Pergamon. Because, you remember, this is where the Roman pro consul resided, and he had a sword. And his sword symbolized the authority of Rome, the power to put people to death, to let them live or to put them to death. Christ’s sword here reminds His people in Pergamum that His power is greater than that of the pro consul, than any earthly ruler. He ““has the sharp two-edged sword.””

And notice, this sword here isn’t described in exactly the same way it is in chapter 1. There it’s described as coming out of Christ’s mouth, showing that Christ doesn’t fight with an actual sword, but He fights with the words of His mouth. He destroys by simply speaking, just as He created. And as we’ll discover in a moment, our Lord is speaking here of destructive judgment against the enemies of the church. Someday He’ll use His words as a weapon to destroy the enemies of His people outside the church. Revelation 19, a sword comes out of his mouth to destroy his enemies at Armageddon. But here we see a sword coming out of His mouth to destroy His enemies within the church. The point is this, Christ has the authority to and will defend His church from its enemies, both inside and outside. And He will do so by pronouncing devastating judgment against them. That’s the point of this sword that comes out of His mouth.

Now, that’s the introduction to the letter and that brings us then to the body of the letter, the state of this church in verses 13 to 16. Now, as our Lord does with all but two churches, He begins with His assessment of the church there in Pergamum with a commendation of the good. Notice what He says in verse 13, ““I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.”” Our

Lord knew their circumstances. I love that, don't you? He says, I understand, I understand your circumstances. He was fully aware of the city where they had to permanently make their home. That's the sense of this verb. That's where you permanently live. That's where you permanently reside. There weren't a lot of other options for them. And Jesus knew, He knew exactly how hard it was for them to live in the city of Pergamum and He commends them for their faithfulness to Him in such a hard place.

Can I just encourage you? Our Lord knows your circumstances as well, whatever they may be, whether they're filled with joy and comfort and relative ease or whether you find yourself in a really hard, difficult, even dark place, the Lord knows. He knows how difficult it is in your circumstances to obey Him. And so, when you are faithful to Him, when you follow Him, when you do what He's commanded, He is just as pleased as He was with this church for their faithfulness in this way.

But look at what Jesus says, Jesus says here that the first century city of Pergamum was the place where Satan's throne was. That's a remarkable statement. What did He mean? Well, obviously the idea is that this was Satan's headquarters. It was where he exercised control, where he exercised rule in that region. But the question is, in what sense? Well, there are several possibilities. This ""Satan's throne"" reference maybe a reference to that throne-like altar to Zeus I showed you, there on the top of the hill. It may be that it's a reference to the worship of the serpent, you remember, that represented the god of healing, that was even referred to as the savior. It's possible ""Satan's throne"" refers to the city itself, because when you approach the city from the south, it looks, on the top of that hill, like a giant throne towering out above the valley. But most likely, the reference to Satan's throne being there in Pergamum, and most commentators would agree and I think this makes the most sense, it refers to the prominence of this city as the official center of emperor worship in Asia Minor. William Mounts writes, "As Rome had become the center of Satan's activity in the west," we'll see that as this letter unfolds, "so Pergamum had become his throne in the east."

Satan's throne most likely referred to this city as the citadel of the emperor worship cult. And our Lord knew that. He knew how hard it was to live in Pergamum. He also knew that many believers in the church had remained faithful to Him. Notice verse 13 goes on to say, and in that

circumstance, “““you hold fast My name,””” literally it’s the present tense, “““you are holding fast My name,””” you are holding onto, you are remaining faithful and loyal to the name of Christ. I think that means not only metaphorically, but literally. In other words, our Lord knew that there were many in this church who were refusing to yield to the political pressure to burn incense to the emperor and to stand there for their financial well-being or their physical well-being and say, Caesar is Lord.

He says “““you are holding fast My name,””” he adds, “““and did not deny My faith.””” He changes verb tenses here and the verb tense here implies backward in time to a specific historical event in which they did not deny their faith in Christ. And He tells us what it was, “““even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.””” We know nothing about Antipas except what Christ tells us here. It’s possible he was an elder or a pastor in the church there in Pergamum. Tradition says that this man was roasted to death in a brazen bull during the reign of Domitian. Christ tells us that Antipas lived in the days of intense persecution and He tells us that Antipas was faithful in the middle of that persecution and was eventually martyred for his faith. He refused, in the capital of emperor worship, to bow the knee and to confess Caesar as Lord. I love the way Christ refers to this man. Did you notice that? He refers to Antipas there in verse 13 in exactly the same way He refers to Himself. Go back to chapter 1 verse 5, this is “from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness.” Antipas was faithful in his witness to Christ even to death.

By the way, that’s why the Greek word for witness, which originally just meant witness, it’s the word from which we get our word martyr. But eventually that word meant more than witness, it meant someone who was faithful in their witness even through death, and therefore it became a martyr, a witness who was faithful to death. This church, now think about this for a moment, think about our church and just imagine this. This church had experienced the death of one of its members, likely one of its leaders, perhaps it’s leading teaching elder, for no crime except worshipping Jesus Christ and refusing to worship another god. And yet, it continued holding fast Jesus’ name.

Having commended the good, Christ moves on to a correction of the sin in verses 14 and 15. Only two churches, the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, received no correction from

Christ. The other five all have issues. And for all of its faithfulness, the church in Pergamum is no exception. Verse 14, ““I have a few things against you.”” Christ explicitly says He had ““a few things,”” but as we’ll discover in a moment, there was really only one problem in Pergamum, but it expressed itself in a couple of ways. Christ identifies two expressions of what we’ll discover is really one problem. So let’s look at the two expressions and then we’ll conclude what the one problem was.

First of all, there were members in the church who held to the teaching of Balaam. Verse 14, ““because you have,”” notice the word ““some,”” ““who hold the teaching of Balaam.”” That means most of the believers in Pergamum were faithful to the Lord, faithful to the Scripture. We just saw that they held firm even when threatened with death. But there were some there who followed wrong doctrine. However, even those who were faithful in the church, for reasons we’re not completely sure, tolerated those who held this false teaching. They failed to follow the biblical requirement of church discipline in Matthew 18. So let’s look at who these people are, members who held to the teaching of Balaam.

Balaam is a mysterious Old Testament character in Numbers 22 to 25. He had the gift of prophecy, but he was not a true believer. Which shows, by the way, that God can speak through whomever He will. He spoke through his donkey, you remember. He spoke through Caiaphas in John 11, an unbelieving high priest. And He spoke through Balaam. Here’s what happened, verse 14 describes it this way, Balaam ““kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and commit acts of immorality.””

Now, let me take you back to that story and make sure you understand it. After the exodus from Egypt, Israel was on its way to the promised land and was passing through the land of Moab, which is just to the east of the Dead Sea. The king of Moab, a man named Balak, was concerned that this massive horde of people might become a threat to his nation. And so he hired a man who was known to be a prophet, Balaam, to curse Israel. And Balaam, always wanted to please for enough money, agreed to come, he agreed to do so. And he came and tried to curse Israel, but God prevented it. Balaam could only bless the people of Israel.

You remember that story? And so what happened? Well, Balaam again had been paid generously for his services and so he wanted to please. And so he suggested to Balak that he

would have the women of Moab seduce the men of Israel and marry them. And from those marriages God's people would be led away from the true God into idolatry. And that is exactly what happened. Listen to Numbers 25:1-2,

While Israel remained there at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.

You see what happened was, Balaam said I have a plan. I can't curse this people but if you want to defeat them, let them defeat themselves and then let God judge them for their sin. And here's how it works. Get your women to seduce their men and then you can suck them into idolatry. And it worked. As a result of this God brought a plague in which 24,000 Israelites died, Numbers 25:9.

Why did that happen? Well, we aren't told there why it happened. But later we're told why it happened. Listen to Numbers 31:16, "Behold, these caused the sons of Israel," listen to this, "through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD." In other words, later Moses says, you want to know why that happened the way it did? It's because Balaam gave that counsel to Balak, here's how you can defeat God's people. And it happened perfectly. It was Balaam's idea.

So Christ here, in His letter to Pergamum, said that there were those in the congregation of that church who essentially followed the same teaching as Balaam. What was He saying? He was saying, there are people in that congregation who are taking the same approach to paganism. They are saying, look, it doesn't matter, don't get all out of shape about this. You need to fit into your culture. This is what we do in Pergamum. The whole city is about this. You need to go to these feasts. How are you going to reach your neighbors if you don't go to these feasts? How are you going to have an opportunity? How are you going to have a business? How are you going to be able to buy and sell? You need to go to the feasts at the temple.

Oh, and by the way, the feast at the temple includes some pretty sordid things, temple prostitution and other things, and you'll just have to go along with that and God will forgive you for that. They attended the pagan temple feast and even engaged in immoral sexual behavior.

What these people were arguing for was simply adapting to the culture. Demosthenes, the famous Greek orator, made it clear that sexual sin was perfectly normal in the Greek culture. This is what he writes, “We have courtesans,” or prostitutes, “for the sake of pleasure. We have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation. We have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian of our household affairs.” So those who held the teaching of Balaam in Pergamum, they were simply arguing that we need to fit in. We need to conform to the moral standards of our day. There’s no reason to stand out like we do.

It’s possible they even argued from 1 Corinthians that such worship didn’t violate the Christian faith since the gods of Pergamum weren’t really gods at all anyway. Or perhaps it was more pragmatic. Maybe they just wanted to fit in with the social context of the city so they could do business. Regardless of what their reason was, they didn’t merely do these things. They tried to convince other people in the church to follow them. And that’s how it always works. Why? Because I’ve got to justify my choices. So, I need to bring other people along with me and if I bring other people along with me, I’ll feel better about myself. Jesus says, ““I have this against you.”” There are members in your church who follow the same teaching path Balaam did and are saying it’s okay. It’s okay to get involved in the pagan feast. It’s okay to eat the food that’s been sacrificed to idols and to eat it there in the temple itself as part of this terrible feast. And it’s ok even to participate in the sinful sexual practices.

There’s a second thing He had against them and that is, there were members in this church who held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Notice verse 15, ““So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”” Now, we met this group back in Ephesus, the church to Ephesus, in chapter 2 verse 6. There, the church in Ephesus rejected these people, not Pergamum. Outside of Revelation, we know little about this group. I mentioned to you when we dealt with that in chapter 2 verse 6, that Irenaeus says this heresy was started by Nicholas, one of the seven men who were appointed to distribute food to the widows in Acts 6:5. He later proved, Irenaeus says, to be a false believer, but maintained his influence because of his past credentials. Other church fathers agree that this man started a sect of licentious antinomian gnostics. But there is one who disagrees. Clement of Alexandria defended Nicholas, arguing that it wasn’t Nicholas’s problem. His teaching had been misunderstood and distorted, misrepresented, and that’s how the Nicolaitans ended up on their view.

Victorinus, the first commentator on Revelation, writing around 270 A.D., said this of the Nicolaitans, “They were false and troublesome men, who as ministers under the name of Nicholas, had made for themselves a heresy. To the effect that, what had been offered to idols might be eaten, and that whoever should have committed fornication might receive peace on the eighth day.” In other words, eight days later, you’re good, God will forgive you, you move on. We can’t be certain of who these people were, but we do know this. All we know for sure is that the teaching of the Nicolaitans was similar but not identical to the teaching of Balaam. Notice how Jesus puts it in verse 15, ““So you also have some,”” so this is different from the those who held the teaching of Balaam, but it’s similar, ““in the same way.”” In the case of both of these groups, their views taught that Christians could attend the pagan feast at the temple and engage in sexual immorality at the temple, to sort of fit in the culture. But it appears the Nicolaitans were more open and aggressive in introducing pagan practices into the church.

Now, immediately, even as I share what was happening, you understand this, if these two groups were allowed to continue in the church in Pergamum, and to thrive, eventually the church itself would be destroyed. Imagine if here at Countryside there were two groups like this in the church and we said nothing, we did nothing, and they continued to worship among us. The church is worthless, it’s destroyed. And so, this correction of sin, this identification of the sin, is followed in verse 16 by a call for repentance. Verse 16, ““Therefore repent.”” Therefore, in light of My hatred of these things.

Listen, the people in Pergamum already knew these things were sin. I mean, think about it. They had the Old Testament. They had read the story of Balaam. They had 1 Corinthians, where Paul had said, you could eat meat sold in the meat market if you did it in your private home, or you did it in an unbelievers home, and he didn’t tell you that’s where it was offered and nobody was going to be offended by that. But what you couldn’t do, Paul said, was go to the pagan temple and have a feast there, and you certainly couldn’t engage in sexual sin. That’s very clear in 1 Corinthians. To do so is to take Christ into that relationship with you.

They also had the Book of Acts and they had the decision of the Jerusalem council. This had been settled so long before, 40, 45 years before, at the Jerusalem Council. Acts 15:29, ““abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from fornication,”” it dealt with this very reality 45 years

earlier. So they knew, they knew what they were doing was wrong, but they refused to repent, these two groups who were engaged in this.

But here's what I don't want you to miss. That's not the point of this letter. That wasn't our Lord's point. Our Lord's real issue with this church was that the faithful leaders and the faithful members of the church, who had remained true to Christ even in spite of the persecution they had endured, had failed to discipline the sinning members out of the church. That's what Christ calls the church to repent of. Repent. The Greek word means to have a change of mind that results in a change of behavior. What is Christ calling them to repent of? Or, to say it another way, what is the sin in the church in Pergamum?

Most of the church wasn't holding the false teaching. Remember, we just saw that back in verse 13. Instead, their sin is the undiscerning, sentimental, lazy, toleration of false teachers and of sinning believers. Their problem was the opposite of Ephesus. Ephesus practiced discipline but had lost their first love for Christ. Pergamum still was committed to Christ, but failed to faithfully discipline false teachers and sinning members and Christ calls them to repent and to practice church discipline. Verse 16, ““or else I am coming to you quickly.”” If they failed to repent, Christ promised He was going to come and He was going to come quickly. Now, that could refer to the Second Coming. And there are some commentators who say, when I come in the Second Coming, I'm going to assess everything, evaluate everything, and then people will get what they deserve based on their deeds. That's possible. But I think it's more likely here a reference to His coming in temporal judgment, shortly, against that church in the first century. I think that seems far more likely. Verse 16 says, ““and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.”” He will wage war with His words against the false teachers and sinning members of this church.

Now, this statement in verse 16, some think this means Christ is going to judge all the members of the church. But I don't think that's what our Lord is saying here because of the change in pronouns. Notice what He says, He changes from you, the church, to them, the false teachers. Which seems to imply His judgment was to be against those members of the church who were teaching others to follow their sinning ways. And in addition to that, this expression of making war with the sword of His mouth is reserved in the Book of Revelation for His enemies. Of

course, Christ would still hold this church and its faithful members and leaders responsible if they failed to obey Him. But the sword in Jesus' mouth describes His mighty words spoken specifically against these false teachers in the church. However, if the rest of the church was unwilling to repent, was unwilling to discipline these sinning members, then it would show that they themselves deserved Christ's judgment and perhaps they were not believers either.

Now, that brings us then to the conclusion of the letter, an exhortation to each believer in verse 17. It begins with a call to listen, ““He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”” This is repeated in each of the letters. It's a challenge to everyone, it's a challenge to you, to everyone who hears or reads these letters, to pay attention to what the Spirit is saying to all the churches through His word. It's interesting, isn't it? Christ is speaking these words and the Spirit is speaking these words as well. It's a call to every Christian and every church to hear the contents of this letter and every letter. Let me just ask you, are you paying attention, are you paying attention to what Christ says here? If you have ears to hear God's Word, hear, hear what the Spirit is saying, this matters.

And then comes a call to overcome, the second half of verse 17. ““To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.”” Now, as we've already learned with the other two churches, if you're a true believer in Jesus Christ and you just keep on believing, you are an overcomer. We saw this in 1 John 5 versus 4 and 5, you can look it up again. Every believer is an overcomer and every believer will inherit all of the promises made in all seven of these letters to those who overcome. So, these are your promises, they're my promises, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ.

Now, in Pergamum the promise to true believers, to those who overcome, is this, ““to him I will give some of the hidden manna,”” or ““I will give the hidden manna.”” You'll notice the word some is italicized, which means it's added by the translators. Now, what is this? Now you remember of course what manna is, manna was the white honey flavored bread that God sent from heaven to feed the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings, Exodus 16.

But what is this, ““the hidden manna””? There have been various suggestions for how to understand this reference. Some say it represents our future reward, you get heavenly manna.

Some say it represents our present spiritual food, just as manna fed the physical bodies of the children of Israel and the Old Testament, manna is spiritual food for our souls now. Others say no, it refers to the pot of manna that was kept in the Ark of the Covenant to commemorate God sending the manna and that symbolizes when we get to heaven that's where the true ark is, according to the Book of Hebrews, right? And so when we get to heaven we're going to eat the true heavenly food that belongs to God's people.

Others say, no, this is Christ Himself who is the bread from heaven. You remember, He said, you got manna in the wilderness, but the Father sent Me, I'm the real bread. I'm prone to think this last is the right choice. He's saying, if you'll be faithful, if you won't surrender My name, if you won't live in patterns of unrepentant sin, if you will evidence that you are Mine by being committed to Me, then I'll give you Myself, you get the bread from heaven, you get Me.

He adds, ““and I will give him a white stone.”” Again, there have been several suggestions as to what this white stone represents. Some suggest it refers to a ballot, because in the ancient world votes were sometimes made by placing stones in a pot. There were no hanging chads in the ancient world. A black stone was no, a white stone was a vote for acceptance.

Some say this is a ballot. Others say no, this refers to a legal verdict. Again, in the courtroom often a black stone was a guilty verdict, we still speak of blacklisting or blackballing someone, and a white stone was an acquittal. Another view is that the white stone represents a memorable occasion. Pliny speaks of a day, “marked by the whitest of white stones.” In the same way we use the expression, a red-letter day.

Still others, and I think this is very unlikely, think it refers to an amulet worn to protect against evil. Some of the people in Pergamum did this, but I don't think Christ is borrowing from their superstition and paganism. Some think it refers to the Urim, the stone worn by the high priest.

But I think most likely, and many commentators would agree with this, most likely this symbolism comes from a white stone that was customarily given to the winners of athletic events. Remember, this area was a place where the games were often held. And when you completed the event, when you won, you were given a white stone and that stone was inscribed with your name as the winner. And here's what was interesting, that stone served as your ticket

to a special awards banquet for the winners. Christ promised believers, He promised the overcomers, Christian if you're really in Christ, He promised you a ticket, a personalized ticket to His great victory celebration in heaven, to the great marriage supper of the lamb in Revelation 19. Verse 17 says, ""and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.""

There are those who argue this new name written on the stone is the name of Christ, and of course that's possible, but I think it's more likely, particularly in how it's expressed here, that it's the name of the one who overcomes. But it's a new name for that believer, for you. It's a new name, new not in time, but in quality. It represents the new character of the believer. God gives every true believer a new character and with that new character a new name, which only that believer knows. You remember what He did for Jacob. Your name is Jacob, but you're no longer going to be Jacob, you're going to be Israel. A new name symbolizing a new character. It's engraved on the white stone given to the victors and will be our admission pass into eternal glory. And that new name will, in a unique way, demonstrate God's individual love for everyone of His true Children.

That's something worth being faithful for; Christ says be faithful and I'll give you the hidden manna. I'll give you the bread that came down from heaven. I'll give you Myself. And, if you're faithful, I'll give you a white stone that shows you were an overcomer. And I'll write your name on that stone. And that will be your ticket into the marriage supper of the Lamb, into eternal glory. And that name that I inscribe on that stone, it will be a new name. It describes not who you were, but who, in sovereign grace, I have made you.

What a letter. So, what are the enduring lessons from the letter to Pergamum. There are several of them. First of all, doctrine matters. Jesus was concerned about what was being taught in the church in Pergamum. Why? Because doctrine influences how you act. It did the church there, it does every other church. It does you. What you believe matters. You have to begin with what you know, because what you know drives what you do. Don't ever be one of those thoughtless inane people who say doctrine is unimportant. Nothing could be more important to your Christian life than doctrine because it will shape you entirely and completely.

Secondly, church discipline matters. Remember, this was the primary issue Jesus had with this church, it was their refusal to discipline the sinning members in their church. Christ said, this is what I'm concerned about. When we practice church discipline, listen, I know it's uncomfortable, it's not like something I enjoy or the elders enjoy, but we do it because Christ commanded it and it still matters to Christ. This is His church, not my church, not the elders' church, ultimately not your church, it's His church, and we're going to do things, as best we can, His way. And it matters to Him, it mattered to this church. He said, what are you doing? You're letting these people stay in the church?

Thirdly, your loyalty to Jesus Christ above all things matters. This is what He praised these believers for there in Pergamum. You got to that part of the city where the temple was and there was a lot of pressure. Are you going to give in? Are you going to be able to buy and sell? Are you going to be able to live a normal life? Are you going to fit into the culture? All you have to do is just go in there and, you know, say your little prayer, burn your little candles, and say Caesar is Lord, you don't have to mean it, and then all is good. They said, no, Jesus is Lord.

Your loyalty to Christ matters. You must never submit to any authority in place of Jesus Christ. In the first century true believers refused to acknowledge the lordship of Caesar and instead acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ. Antipas was killed for confessing Christ and refusing to confess the emperor. And Christ said, I praise him. He gets the same title I wear, the faithful witness. I can tell you this, there were people in that church, I'm sure, who said Antipas, what are you doing? Just say the words, think about all the life you have in front of you. But I can promise this, the moment Antipas opened his eyes in heaven, he was grateful for the decision he made.

Thirdly, or excuse me, fourthly, your love for Jesus Christ, your love for Jesus Christ above all people and things, matters. Our love for Jesus Christ is to be supreme. We must never allow Him to be displaced by anything, by family, by wealth and power, by personal comfort, by work, by success, whatever it is.

And then finally, your personal holiness matters. When professing Christians in Pergamum were attending pagan temples, eating food offered to idols at those temples, and committing sexual sin Christ saw and He cared. He cares about our sin as well. Yes, He paid for it with His

blood. Yes, He has redeemed us from our sin. But that doesn't mean we now have a license to sin. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Pursue sanctification," "Pursue sanctification without which no one will see the Lord." Your personal holiness matters to Christ. These are powerful lessons from a first century church. May we embrace them. Let's pray together.

Father, thank You for these remarkable words, this letter from our Lord to the church at Pergamum. Lord, it has so much to teach us in our day. I pray that You wouldn't allow us as individuals or as a church to be guilty of undiscerning tolerance, sentimental tolerance of the sin of other people in the church. Lord, help us to be gracious, to be forgiving where there's repentance. Help us not to be always confronting every little thing. Help us to overlook and be kind and gracious, overlooking faults. But Lord, where there is unrepentant, ongoing patterns of destructive sin, help us to be faithful to follow Matthew 18, both for the good of the person, for the good of the church, and for the name of Christ our Lord. And Lord, help us individually to care about our own personal holiness, our own love for Christ, our loyalty to Him. May these things matter above all. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.