

THE SHARP DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Revelation 2:12-17 To the Church in Pergamum

¹² “To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

¹⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

Jude 11-13

¹¹ Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam’s error; they have been destroyed in Korah’s rebellion.

¹² These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. ¹³ They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.

MESSAGE:

In our Lenten messages this year we are addressing the question: “Is our church God’s church?” For our texts we’re using the first three chapters of the *Book of Revelation* in which Jesus describes God’s model for His church and then explains how churches can drift away from that model when the members start making it *their* church instead of God’s church. According to God, the most important thing for a church is that it maintain a close relationship with Jesus Christ. This happens when the Word of God is faithfully preached

and the members are focused on serving the spiritual and material needs of those beyond its walls. When the pastor and the members of the church strive to “*love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength*” and to “*love their neighbor as themselves*” the church will maintain a close relationship with Jesus Christ. (*Mark 12:30-31*) Without a close relationship with Jesus Christ and an evangelistic outreach to neighbors, the church becomes self-absorbed and focused on its own needs. This process seems to have been taking place in seven churches Paul had founded in Asia Minor, prompting Jesus to write letters to them pointing out where they had departed from their God-given model and urging them to repent and return to it. These are real letters written at a specific time in history to real churches, but they are also prophetic letters: they describe a recurrent cycle of deterioration and renewal in the relationship between Jesus and His Church which will continue until He returns.

The pattern of these letters is simple: Jesus begins each one by acknowledging the strengths the church has. Then He points out something that is lacking in their relationship with Him, urges them to repent and warns them what will happen if they don't. Last week we looked at His letter to the church at Ephesus. For the most part the Ephesian church was a strong, vibrant, outward-focused church, but they had one problem: they had abandoned what Jesus called their “first love.” Their commitment to loving the Lord their God with all their heart and mind and soul and strength and to loving their neighbors as themselves had begun to weaken.

Now, like the church at Ephesus, the church at Pergamum had some real strengths. Pergamum was a large city of over 350,000 people and was known for vice and decadence—so much so that Jesus refers to it as the “throne of Satan.” The church had been subject to attacks—even to the extent that one of its members, a man by the name of Antipas, had been murdered for attempting to witness to his faith. Even in the face of persecution, however, the members stood firm and refused to renounce their faith. There is much to be admired in this and Jesus says so.

Nevertheless, there were a few problems. Jesus identifies these problems by naming two evil teachings which had gained footholds in the congregation: He calls one “the teaching of Balaam” and the other the “teaching of the Nicolaitans.” We'll look first at the teaching of Balaam.

Balaam was a false prophet who appears in the *Book of Numbers*. He was approached by a man named Balak who was the king of the Moabites—enemies of Israel. Balak offered to pay Balaam if he would pronounce a curse on the armies of Israel so that he could defeat them in battle. Balaam accepted the offer and tried three times to call down a curse upon Israel but each time God forced him to utter a blessing instead. Since that didn't work, Balaam suggested to King Balak that he might be able to bring about the destruction of Israel by encouraging the Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men and convince them to quit worshipping God and start worshipping Baal, the god of the

Moabites. Now Baal worship was gross even by modern standards. It involved shrine prostitution, orgies and human sacrifice. It was common among the pagan nations that surrounded Israel and it occasionally made inroads among the Israelites. Apparently something like this had taken place in the church at Pergamum where some members were participating in pagan worship as well as the worship of God. Paul had condemned this kind of behavior in the strongest possible terms. First, he condemned it because it was immoral: *“Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never!”* (1 Cor. 6:15). In the second place he condemned it because it was pagan worship: *“...the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too.”* (1 Cor. 10:20-21)

Now this kind of sin is not merely a relic of ancient Israel: it shows its ugly face nowadays in the mentality of the person who worships God on Sunday and sets his heart on worldly things the rest of the week. It's a form of what is called *antinomianism* or lawless living which perverts God's grace by using it to justify open and unrepentant sinning. You know how it goes: *“I like to sin and God likes to forgive so I'll sin all the more so that God can forgive all the more. Then we'll both be doing what we like best.”* This kind of behavior—and the attitude that lies behind it—makes a mockery of God's forgiveness of our sins. Paul refers to it in his letter to the Romans: *“Shall we sin all the more so that grace may abound? Never! How shall we who died to sin continue to live in it?”* (Romans 6:1-2) Jesus Himself issues a frightening warning to those who abuse his grace this way: *“Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven... Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”* (Matthew 7:21-23) This seems to fit the mold of some of the members of the congregation at Pergamum who ignored the warning and indulged in pagan worship as well as the worship of God.

The second charge Jesus levels at the church is that it tolerates members who hold to the teachings of the Nicolaitans. Now the Nicolaitans had the same goal as the Baal worshippers: they wanted to live in open and unrepentant sin and they used God's grace to justify doing so. They took Paul's words, *“...you are not under law, but under grace...”* out of context and used them to rationalize flagrant, sinning. (Romans 6:14) Like those who followed the teaching of Balaam, they began worshipping their own appetites in addition to worshipping God.

Because they had done nothing to rid themselves of these blasphemous teachings, Jesus warns the church at Pergamum: *“Repent, therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”* (Revelation 2:16) The sharp, double-edged sword of Jesus' word! The author of Hebrews writes: *“For the word of God*

is living and active. Shaper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) Or in Jesus’ own words, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.” (Matthew 10:34-36) Can this be “gentle Jesus, meek and mild?” Hardly. When it comes to His church, Jesus is a stern taskmaster and He commands his disciples to surgically remove any infected parts. He has entrusted His Word and Spirit to churches that bear His Name and He will not tolerate His Name being tarnished because His Name is His power to save.

What was going on in Pergamum is what results when God and neighbor cease to be a church’s first love. A new god begins to coalesce in the imaginations of its members, a god who is also triune--the god of me, myself and I. It is the beginning of spiritual narcissism, the glorification of man rather than God. Of human potential rather than God’s omnipotence. Of creation rather than the Creator. Of the politics that govern the kingdom of this world rather than the Word of God that governs the Kingdom of Heaven. Of what we can do in the here and now rather than what God will do in His own good time. Someone once said that we are all born with a God-shaped hole in us and that we will either fill that hole with God or we will fill it with an idol. And the most pernicious idol man has ever created is...himself. At Pergamum, some of the members were filling that hole with themselves rather than God. And that was the beginning of spiritual cancer—only a small tumor at first, but malignant and ready to spread.

When a church ceases to make its relationship with Jesus Christ and its Gospel outreach its first love, it begins to turn in on itself. Its energy subsides, its temperature cools and it starts stewing in its own juice. Next Sunday we’ll see what can happen next.

Amen.