

There is a story of a man who could not decide what side he wanted to fight for during the American Civil War, so as a compromise, he put on the coat of the North and the pants of the South, and guess what happened? He was shot at by soldiers from the North and from the South. In his attempt to play both sides, he got shot at from both sides!

That word “*compromise*” conjures up all kinds of mixed feelings, especially in our current political climate. Typically, when we hear that word, we feel as if we are in some way selling out and betraying our principles; however, compromise can be a positive thing – a needful thing. Often times, for the sake of peace and unity, we might have to compromise, we might have to give up some of our desires and our preferences so we can come to a mutual agreement – and this tends to be the case in maintaining friendships, and marriages, and churches. Compromise is a give and take, and it can be a good thing. But compromise can also be a negative thing if it causes us to depart from godly biblical principles and values – trading the truth of God for a lie, for then it becomes damaging and destructive. This is what happens to many Christians today who are playing both sides so to speak – wearing the coat of the North and the pants of the South.

This morning, we are continuing through **Chapter 2** of **Revelation**. Two weeks ago, we looked at the church in Ephesus which from all appearances seemed to be a great church, a busy church, a doctrinally sound church, but they were also described by Jesus, who knows everything about the church, as being an unloving church. Jesus warned this church about their unloving attitude, but He also told them that their love could be restored if they *remembered* the kind of love they once had, if they *repented* from their unloving ways, and if they *repeated* those loving actions which were once a priority in their lives, because sometimes the loving actions come before the loving feelings. Unfortunately, as Jesus had warned, history tells us this unloving church ceased to be a church.

Last week, we looked at the church in Smyrna. This was a suffering church – a church that persevered through severe persecution and endured extreme poverty because they identified with Jesus Christ. Essentially, this was a church that was stripped of everything but Jesus – Jesus was all they had, and through it all, they discovered that Jesus was all they needed. Jesus described them as a spiritually rich church, and today, there is still a Christian presence in Smyrna, which is known as Izmir, Turkey.

Our next church on the postal route is the church in Pergamum. The city of Pergamum was located about 75 miles north of Smyrna, built on a 1000-foot hill,

and at the time of John's writing, it was the capital of Asia Minor. Unlike the sea port cities of Ephesus and Smyrna, which were known as being major commercial and trade centers in the region, the city of Pergamum was about 20 miles inland – it had no sea port – it was not on a major trade route, and therefore, it was of little commercial significance. Instead, Pergamum was known for its culture, with its art galleries, and theaters, gymnasiums, sports arenas, Roman baths, a stadium which could seat 50,000 spectators, and they had a university.

Pergamum was also known for its massive library – at that time, believed to be the second largest in the world, only behind the library in Alexandria, Egypt. The library in Pergamum maintained some 200,000 volumes of handwritten literature, in fact, it was reportedly the place where parchment was first invented. Up until that time, all writing had been done on papyrus which was made from reeds that grew on the banks of the Nile. The Egyptians had a monopoly on the making of papyrus and they had their great library in Alexandria. The story goes, the king of Pergamum, in an attempt to enhance the reputation of his own library, tried to hire away the chief librarian from Alexandria, but the king of Egypt got wind of it, so he had this poor librarian put into prison to keep him from leaving, and then cut off the supply of papyrus to Pergamum.

Well, the library of Pergamum had to do something, so they came up with a new process by which the skins of animals could be pressed and treated to retain ink for writing, and that was the invention of parchment – all because of an international incident created over a librarian. Go figure! So, I think it is fair to say that the “word”, more specifically, the “*written word*” was very important to the people of Pergamum who took great pride in their massive library.

The people in Pergamum could also be described as a religious people. Just like the city of Smyrna, the city of Pergamum was highly devoted to emperor worship which was mandated by Rome, in fact, they were the first to build a temple in Asia Minor for that purpose, and if a person did not participate in this cultic practice and once a year say “*Caesar is Lord*” – they were persecuted and likely executed. Not only did the people in this city engage in emperor worship, there were also a strong Greek culture there, reflected by massive temples to several of their Greek gods – to include a famous temple to Zeus.

The city of Pergamum also had a medical center, which was based on their worship of Asclepius. Asclepius was the Greek god of medicine and healing, and he held a serpent-entwined staff, which remains a symbol of medicine even today. In this city, there was a huge temple to this god of healing and it was reported that those

who suffered, were allowed to spend the night in the darkness of the temple with non-poisonous snakes that were kept there. In the night, the sufferer might be touched by one of these snakes as it slithered over the ground on which a person lay, and the touch of the snake was thought to be the touch of the Asclepius himself, and the touch was believed to bring healing.

Thousands of people flocked to this place each year for healing, and that begs the question – **were there any healings from the worship of this false god?** History tells us there were many who were reportedly healed there, to include Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius who was said to have been cured of a lung problem, and all of that brings up a good point. As we will see later in the book of Revelation, Satan is also able to produce his own miracles to deceive people for the purpose of drawing them away from the One True God. Satan is extremely cunning – a wolf in sheep’s clothing, appearing as an angel of light, and if necessary, he can use a little supernatural power, do a little good, and share a little truth, all leading towards a big deception and an even bigger fall.

In Pergamum, for a people who prided themselves in being well educated and cultured – a people who seemed to cherish the written word, they were duped and deceived to worship false gods.

So, that’s the background of Pergamum – now let’s dig into our passage. If you have your Bible, turn to **Revelation 2:12**.

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:”

In this verse, Jesus describes Himself as the **One who has the sharp two-edged sword**, and I think that description could refer to a couple of things.

First, a symbol of power for Rome was the sword and Jesus was reminding this church that Rome may be powerful, but He is much more powerful. His sword is very sharp, razor sharp, and its double edged.

Secondly, if we compare Scripture with Scripture, it is the Word of God that is described as being sharper than any double-edged sword, and if we go back to **verse 16** in the first chapter and jump down to **verse 16** in the second chapter, we see references of the same thing, where Jesus is symbolically described as having a sword coming from His mouth – that sword being His Word.

So, for a people who appeared to value the word, the church in Pergamum had better pay attention to these words which come from the Lord Himself – for it is He who has the ultimate power and authority, not Rome, and it is He who has the very last word.

Jesus continues and says in **verse 13**,

“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.”

Right out the gate Jesus explains that Satan is not in hell, but has his throne in the city of Pergamum, which I suspect was a reference to the false worship of multiple Greek gods and the worship of the Roman Emperor. In essence, the Lord may be saying that Satan had real influence in this capital city of Asia Minor and he was able to exercise his deceptive power there – but be that may, the Lord commends the church in Pergamum for holding fast to His **name**. Despite the fact they lived in such a difficult city, the church in Pergamum would not link the name of Jesus to the other pagan gods in the city. Jesus wasn’t one of many gods – He was the one and only God.

Secondly, the Lord commended this church because they did not renounce their **faith** – they would not deny their faith in Jesus even in the midst of severe persecution.

If you noticed, Jesus mentioned someone named **Antipas**, described as the Lord’s **faithful witness**. There isn’t a lot known about Antipas, but according to church tradition, Antipas was thought to have been the first Christian martyr in Asia Minor. It is told that Antipas was brought to the temple of Caesar, and commanded to say out loud “*Caesar is Lord*,” but instead Antipas shouted, “*Jesus alone is Lord!*” A Roman official told him, “*Antipas, don’t you know that the whole world is against you?*” to which he replied, “*Then Antipas is against the whole world!*” Antipas was then put into a large brass kettle shaped like a bull, a fire was lit under it, and he was roasted to death.

So, this church was in real danger from the outside world, but they didn’t try to escape. They chose to remain in the danger – not shrinking away from it, but there was another danger that was creeping inside this church – a danger just as real, and it was a danger that comes from compromising with the world. Listen to what Jesus says beginning with **verse 14**.

¹⁴ “**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.** ¹⁵ **So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**”

Despite their stand in the face of fiery persecution, they were not faultless. The church in Pergamum was described by Jesus as being a *compromising church*, for apparently there were groups who had infiltrated this church with their false teaching, and some members in the church – not all of them, accepted these teachings. In this passage, Jesus mentioned the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

Let’s start with **Balaam**. If you remember, back in **Numbers 23-24**, Balaam was a wicked prophet who was hired by Balak – the King of Moab to curse Israel. King Balak was fearful of the Israelites because he heard what had happened in Egypt. He heard about the Red Sea. He heard about the fall of Jericho, and King Balak wanted God’s people gone, so he hired the prophet Balaam to curse Israel, and on three separate occasions – God prevented Balaam from doing it.

So, the prophet Balaam told King Balak here’s what you do instead. “*If you can’t beat them – join them.*” Take some of your pretty pagan girls and have them parade before the men of Israel, tempting them, and seducing them into sexual immorality and intermarriage. And since these women were worshipers of false gods and pagan idols, they will also introduce false worship and pagan practices into the tribes of Israel. Unfortunately, this plan worked well and God’s people were corrupted because they compromised.

So, what does this mean for the church in Pergamum? These people who had infiltrated the church were in effect saying, “*There’s nothing wrong by compromising with Rome and our pagan neighbors. What’s the big deal? What’s the harm in saying ‘Caesar is Lord’ once a year?* They’re just three little words. I mean, everyone else is doing it, and you saw what happened to Antipas. If it will help us to be liked by those outside the church, then there’s nothing wrong with compromising God’s principles and values and joining them.”

Boy, is this relevant to us today. In the church, there are people who are being seduced to compromise the principles and the values found in the Word of God with the immoral culture they live in. There are people in churches today who see nothing wrong with engaging in behaviors that are completely contrary to the

Word of God. Today, there are entire mainstream denominations that affirm certain immoral behaviors that are clearly spoken against in the Bible. It is a compromise of God's perfect standards, and it was occurring in Pergamum.

The Lord also mentioned another group called the **Nicolaitans**. This is the same group mentioned by Jesus when addressing the church in Ephesus. *Nico* means "power" and *laity* means "people," so these Nicolaitans may have tried to exercise power over the people – falsely teaching that people had to go through them, or go through layers of people to get access to God.

My guess is they were similar to the Gnostics, and there were several groups of them who claimed to have a special relationship with God, having special knowledge from God, and if you wanted an inside track with God – then people had to go through them.

So, probably these two self-serving groups worked together to draw Christians back into the corruption of the world, compromising their biblical principles and values, replacing the perfect standards of God's Word with their own distorted teaching and man-made philosophy – and instead of the church getting into the world, the world gradually and subtly crept into the church.

I like what Charles Swindoll has to say about the compromise of God's standards in the church. He says that compromise never occurs quickly and it is often the first small step towards total disobedience. Using a nautical illustration, he explains that when a ship drifts off course—it's usually not because someone suddenly pulls the wheel to starboard or to port. Most often, invisible currents and winds gradually and subtly move the ship off course, and before the ship's crew know it, the jagged rocks of the shoreline are ripping holes into it.

The great evangelist D.L. Moody once said, "*The place for the ship is in the sea, but God help the ship if the sea gets into it.*"

The sea got into the church in Pergamum. They compromised God's perfect standards with the world's corrupt and immoral values, and they were dangerously drifting off course. Instead of fixing their eyes on the simple truth found in God's Word, they compromised by adding their own truth and by subtracting from God's truth. They were in danger both doctrinally and morally, but Jesus had a course correction for them. Look at **verse 16**.

"Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth."

There were some in this church who wanted to be accepted and liked by the culture around them by compromising God's standards and Jesus said to them – **repent!** Stop it! Stop what you are doing, turn around, and take God's Word seriously. Take the necessary actions to remove the false teaching and the false teachers from your midst. The compromise has to end – now.

To Jesus, living in Satan's town was no excuse for these compromising and lackadaisical Christians in Pergamum. Repent. This church felt the Roman sword, but an unrepentant church would feel the sword of Christ. Jesus would discipline His church if they did not repent – He gave them a stern warning, but He also gave an encouraging appeal. Look at **verse 17**.

“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.”

Okay, I have said on a few occasions that when it comes to interpreting Scripture, before we can understand what a passage means for us in the *here* and *now*, we must first understand what the passage meant to the original readers back *then* and *there*. This is one of those passages that probably made complete sense to the original readers, but for us today, it's kind of a head scratcher.

This appeal is to all of us, to anyone with ears, and Jesus says, to the one who **overcomes** this sin of compromising God's standards, they will receive **hidden manna**.

What is this hidden manna? I'm not entirely sure. I know God fed the Israelites with manna while they were wandering in the wilderness. I know a pot of manna was taken and placed in the ark of the covenant – and the ark was a symbol of God's unique presence with His people, and I also know that Jesus said He was the bread from heaven (**John 6:41**). So, I can only guess that Jesus promises to give those who overcome a source of spiritual nourishment and strength which is found in Him.

The second promise is a **white stone** with a **new name** on it. White marble was reportedly mined in Pergamum, but I don't think anyone truly knows what Jesus meant by its mention here – but there are a few good ideas.

In the ancient world, the use of a white stone had many associations. When voting, a white stone meant “yes,” where a black stone meant “no.” A white stone could

be a ticket to a banquet, a sign of friendship, or given as a sign of acquittal in a court of law. Jesus may have any one of these meanings in mind, or something else in mind, but at the very least we know that it has the assurance of some type of blessing and privilege.

One idea behind this **new name** is that it shows what an intimate relationship we have with God. When a couple is close, they often have “pet names” for each other, and that could be the idea here. Another idea is simply the assurance it gives of our heavenly destination. Your name is there, waiting for you. It’s as if your “reservation” in heaven has been made.

So, this message from Jesus was a course correction, of sort, to a church that was trying to play both sides. The church in Pergamum did not run from the city where Satan had a strong influence. They did not shrink back from the dangers posed to them from the outside, but from the inside, some in this congregation had compromised God’s standards and values, compromised God’s truth, for standards and values that were not from God. They did not recognize the danger that had subtly and gradually crept in their midst causing them to drift off course.

We live in a time and a place where it is so easy to compromise biblical standards and principles and values – justifying and making excuses for our attitudes and our behaviors that are clearly opposed to God’s expressed will for us. It is so easy to play both sides just to be accepted and liked by those who follow the values of this corrupt, and immoral, and lost world – but we can’t give in, for if we do, we are no different from those outside the church. We become a church just like the world, and as a consequence we have no witness to those outside the church. Remember, the world is watching us, and **how can we say to a lost person that, “God can change your life” if our lives look no different than theirs?**

So, if you are guilty of living a compromised Christian life so you can do what you want to do, if you have lowered God’s biblical standards in your life to be liked and accepted by those in the world, Jesus calls you to repent – to stop it – now.

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