

WILL WE COMPROMISE A LITTLE?
Jesus' Concerns for His Church
Dr. George O. Wood

Revelation 2:12-18. We're in a series relating to "Jesus' Concerns for His Church." This is the third letter from the Lord to the churches of the Roman province of Asia, an area of the world known now as western Turkey. Here is what the Lord says in this third letter to these churches:

"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write, These are the words of him who has the sharp double edged sword. 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 even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness who was put to death in your city where Satan lives. Nevertheless I have a few things against you. You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam who taught Balac to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight 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 I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it known only to him who receives it."

My message today is entitled "Will we compromise a little?" The Lord expects the best from his people. Here is a letter to the church that the Lord expects more out of us than just Pass/Fail.

The city of Pergamum was a beautiful city. If you've ever wanted to live in a city that had a view this would be the place. Sort of the Spyglass Hill of the ancient world. Located ten miles inland from the ocean. A city spiraling upward to a thousand foot hill, the top of which had a clear view of the Mediterranean ten miles away in the distance. It had been a royal city for four centuries. The Romans had made it the capital of the province of Asia even though it was not as well populated a city as the cities of Ephesus and Smyrna. Kind of like Sacramento is California capital even though LA and San Francisco are the big towns.

This city had at the top of its city as did many cities of the ancient world the acropolis or the high hill that was devoted to the location of the pagan temples. Particularly imposing was the temple dedicated to the god Zeus. And from an outcrop of rock there was a great altar to Zeus on which sacrifices were offered. Anyone down in the valley below looking up on that city and seeing the altar of Zeus jutting out of the promitory of the town it reminded them of someone on a throne. The altar itself looked like a throne.

Interestingly enough the Lord says he knows where Satan dwells. This is the city where Satan dwells. That is this demonic kind of cult worship that was practiced in this city. That altar jutting out from the mountaintop reminded one of hell's headquarters of where Satan sat.

After I preached this sermon in the first service, one of our members came to me. He and his wife were in East Berlin just three days ago. They were in the great museum in East Berlin. There in that museum was the temple of Zeus from Pergamum. It had been transported decades ago to Berlin. They said that as they stood in front of that massive replaced structure now located in Berlin that they read the scripture from Revelation "I know where you live, where Satan has his throne." They said the thought went through our mind that Satan's power so dwelt

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in Pergamum that when they moved that temple to Berlin on the days of Adolph Hitler, Satan must have taken up his headquarters here again.

Many of you have never lived in a city that had strong demonic powers associated with being in that very place. I had such an opportunity when I was a young person living in China and Tibet. Especially one place – the place of a hundred thousand idols. The highlight religiously in that town was to bring out all the butter gods that were kept in the cold caves in the mountainsides. These gods, multi-colored, all made out of butter. Some standing 30 feet tall were paraded through the town. The feast was concluded with a devil dance in what we would identify as scary Halloween costumes but they were dead serious about demon worship. The one who presided over the devil dance was the lord of hell and death, the most garrulously dressed of all the priests.

I remember the night before that festival started, staying with my missionary parents and brother and sister, and none of us hardly being able to sleep that night because of the oppression of Satanic power was so strong. About all my parents did for hours was simply say the name of Jesus or cause Satan to remember the blood of Christ on the cross. You say, that sounds so mystical. If you lived in a town that's dedicated to demon worship you better be a little bit mystical or you're not going to survive if you're not tuned in to where the Spirit is.

So this was the kind of city where Christians were having to live. It was an administrative capital city. It was also a city that was dedicated to the god Asclepius which mean savior. The serpent god which is still on medical symbols today. The serpent on the pole that's _____ the god of healing. Archeologists have unearthed the tunnel that people came to walk through. They came from all over the ancient world. Pergamum was sort of the Lourdes of Asia where the sick came to be cured. In this tunnel that ran for well over a hundred feet, a dark tunnel, filled with serpents. Somebody who wanted healed would disappear down into it and reports are that some never emerged – dying of the snake bites while in the tunnel. Others struggled through unhealed. Some miraculously cured by demonic powers emerged on the other side.

In this town the Christians lived. The thing that made it hardest for them in that town was the fact that every year they were required to appear before the governor and burn a pinch of incense before the statue of the Caesar and say, "Caesar is Lord." The rest to the pagans didn't have a problem with that because they could say Caesar is lord but the Christians only have one Lord. Not to appear in that annual appearance and burn incense meant that you didn't get your passport that year, which meant you didn't get the good jobs if you got any job. It meant you didn't have a guarantee of housing or education. It was a cost to being a Christian in that town.

It's interesting how the Lord writes to it. He does as he does to all the other churches. He identifies first his character. He takes an aspect of his character that that town would understand and the Christians in that town would understand. The Roman proconsuls were of two kinds. The governors. One kind of proconsul had what is called the power of the sword. He could on his own authority execute people. The other kind of proconsul did not have power of the sword and would have to look to higher Roman authority for the approval for execution. At Pergamum the proconsul had power of sword. He could execute one spot any body who he chose.

So Jesus in writing to this town reminds them of who has the ultimate sword. He says these are the words of him who has the sharp doubled edged sword. In choosing this reference to describe

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himself, and how strange it seems to see Jesus of Galilee with a sword in his hand. Yet in choosing this metaphor what the Lord is restating is what he had told the disciples when he was on earth. "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell."

The ultimate loyalty whether we live in Pergamum or Costa Mesa, the ultimate loyalty of life is owed to Jesus Christ who has the ultimate power. You owe your ultimate loyalties to the ultimate power. That's his character. He is the Lord.

There is a commendation, which Jesus brings to this church. As he always seeks to bring us a word of approval whenever he can. He commends this Christian group of people living in that town for their unbreakable grip on him while living in hell's headquarters. He said, "You held fast to me." The word for "holding fast" or remaining true as it's translated is the same word as in chapter 2:1 of Jesus holding the seven stars, that is the leadership of the church. It carries the idea of tightly gasping on to.

Jesus commends us for the grip we have on him. At Pergamum the grip was so strong it lasted even as unshakable loyalty in the midst of martyrdom. We live in a society where we're protected by laws and locks. How wonderful it is to go to be at night and know you're secure by making sure you checked all the locks. Secure in a relative kind of way. It would be awful to live where you had no protection.

Think what it's like for believers like at Pergamum where they have no protection. Anybody could come in without a search warrant and just take you and kill you. In fact, Jesus says you remained true to me in the days of Antipas, my martyr, my witness who was put to death in your city." The word for "martyr" is the word "witness". The word translated in the English Bible as "witness" is literally the Greek word "martyr." To be a good witness is one who stakes your life on what you see. That's why the early Christians were martyrs – they were witnesses.

Who is Antipas? A leader in the church. Tradition says how they martyred Antipas was, the town had prepared this hollow bronze bull big enough for a man to be pushed inside of it. They pushed Antipas inside of it and built a fire underneath and roasted him to death. The Christians had had a tight grip on Christ at the time.

They were commended for their loyalty to Christ. Could anything be wrong in a church that's been so loyal to Christ? I think only the Lord could find something wrong with this church he's the only one who would have the right to find anything wrong. And something is wrong so he has a criticism to offer the church. The criticism is there are some, a minority in the church that are holding to the doctrine of Balaam or the teaching of the Nicolaitans. It's all mystical to us but there's a meaning to names. Balaam is a Hebrew name. It comes from the Hebrew word that means "to conquer the people." Nicolaitans is from a Greek word meaning the same thing – people conqueror. I doubt that this group ever advertised itself as such. Balaam was a Judas-like prophet described in Numbers 23 and 24. I found that cults don't usually give themselves bad names.

Jesus is calling them by their real name. Balaamities. Balaam was the prophet in the Old Testament who wanted to curse God's people for profit. God wouldn't let him do it so he finally turned around and told Israel's enemies, the nation of Moab, Here's how you can win against

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them. Have your women seduce the Israeli men. Teach them through seduction to worship your gods. Incredibly a group emerged in that church at Pergamum that on the one hand was saying we are loyal to Jesus Christ. But on the other hand was going to the temple banquets, getting drunk at the temple feasts, eating at meals that were dedicated to an alien God. And having relationship with temple prostitutes and priestesses and other acts of immorality.

The church as a whole did not know how to cope with these believers who were engaged in immorality.

The problem at Pergamum is very much alive today in the church. There were those in the Pergamum church who justified their behavior and said, Those Christians who have their tight view of morality are just uptight. Compromise is every bit a struggle today. We can worship Jesus and watch adult home videos. We can keep our hearts pure and enjoy the soaps all day long. We can get drunk on Saturday night and sing Hallelujah on Sunday. We can praise the Lord and tell dirty jokes. We can pay our tithes and beat our competition in a shady deal. We can be true to Christ and sleep with who we want – male or female. Those are part and parcel of the experience at Pergamum in the church today.

How can we be compassionate and yet stand for truth. This is what the Lord is calling the church at Pergamum to do. To be concerned for people but not yield an inch on what is right or moral or true.

To me life is rather simple and uncomplicated. It starts with Jesus Christ, who is he? If Jesus Christ is risen from the dead then it means he is the only one of a category. The only one of a kind. He has all power and all authority. If Jesus who is risen from the dead tells me jump, I jump. When he tells me right is right and wrong is wrong, I don't get into an argument with him and try to change his mind. My responsibility is to conform my life to the Lord. Not ask the Lord to conform himself to my sin and my nearsightedness and my misbehavior.

As pastor I face a temptation all ministers face. Everyone who stands and ministers fights the temptation of wanting to be popular. We judge ministers these days by the size of their churches. There's the constant push that in order to be popular you tone down parts of the scripture that offend people. I've had to make a decision of whether I'm going to offend people or offend Christ. If you're going to be faithful to the gospel you will not please everybody all the time.

If your attitude on these subjects doesn't line up with mine your problem is really not with me. It's with Christ. Christ tells his church that the immoral minority must repent. And he tells the majority that they cannot be silent on these questions. He tells the majority they can't simply set back and fold their hands and say it's ok. And you don't ever need to speak against it. Or assert what is right and the behavior that he wants. So he corrects the church and gives it one word of correction – repent! That simply means literally to change your mind. Change your mind. Change your attitude. Change your direction.

Ask yourself this question: Is there any compromise in my own life, which the Lord is seeking to address? Seeking to change? The Holy Spirit will help you see that if there is. He'll want you to change.

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The Lord in a final part of this letter gives a great challenge to the church. He tells it to overcome. He says if you overcome I'm going to give you two great things. Hidden manna and a white stone.

What are these? Manna was the food God supernaturally gave to the Israelites when they wandered in the wilderness under Moses for 40 years. When the manna was no more because they came into the Promised Land, God told the high priest Aaron to take a little bit of the manna and put it in a pot and put it in a box that was covered with gold. The box was the Ark of the Covenant. It was to be kept in the holy of holies in the temple as a reminder that God fed his people the years they wandered in the wilderness. There came a time centuries later when Israel was taken captive and the ark was taken captive. One of the traditions in the first century among Jewish people that just before Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. Jeremiah the great prophet went into the Holy of Holies, took the manna out of the Ark of the Covenant and hid it. That manna will only show up when the messiah appears.

I think Jesus was building on that when he said, "I am the bread of life. I've come with the manna. I've come with what you need in life. I've got resources for you that no one else has." Jesus is saying "I've got something to offer you that will get you through eternity and I'm the only one who has this food. I'll give you manna, hidden manna."

Then he says I'll give you a white stone with your own name on it. White stones are used in various ways in secular society at that time. They were used in courts of law. Some juries had before them black stones and white stones. When they came to vote on a defendant if they thought he was innocent they'd cast a white stone in a jar. That meant acquitted. If he was guilty, a black stone. If he got white stones, he was acquitted. So one of the things Jesus may be saying to us if you'll follow me and be faithful to me I've got a white stone for you. On that great day when you appear before me, the judgment is acquitted, no charge against you. All charges have been dropped.

Another way the white stone was used was in some cultures at the door of the house were these vases or jars. Then there was also some black pebbles and some white pebbles, black stones and white stones. At the end of the day you went over to the pebble pile and you decided what kind of a day it was. If it had been a bad day for you, you pulled out a black stone and you dropped it into your jar. If it had been a good day and you felt real good about how you lived you got a white stone and you put that into your jar. When you died they poured out the stones in the jar to determine whether you lived a happy life or a sad life. I think we ought not to wait until we die. About every month we ought to pull it out and look at it.

So Jesus might be saying to the church, I'll make things come out ok.

A last use for the white stone is it was sort of like a pass or even a credit card. If you were an artist and you were being sponsored by a patron it would have his name and your name and it would entitle you to food and lodging. Just show that stone. Or if you were a gladiator and you had had a distinguished career and they finally decided that rather than letting you get killed when you get old and weak, they'd honorably retire you, you'd get the white stone with the initials SP. That stood for "one who had served with valor." That then was a pass to all kinds of things, sort of like a permanent pension plan.

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Jesus was saying I'm going to give you a white stone with your own name on it. That is, Here is a pass to the greatest banquet that is ever coming up. To the banquet of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. The pass to get you in. He'll give you a white stone with your own name on it. The name in stone means it's permanent. It's not written down on a piece of paper.

Jesus says it's a name which no one but he himself would know and the one who receives it. It's special and it's personal.

I'm called Dr. Wood by those who know me least. "Pastor Wood" by those who know me more closely. My given Christian name is "George." My children call me "Dad" or "Daddy". My mother called me "Georgie." And my wife calls me "Babe" or "Honey." The more endearing the term the more restricted is its use. Therefore when Jesus says I'll give you a name which no one but you and I know is the most special use of all.

The bridegroom – Jesus – will speak to the bride – us. He will have a tender name for us that shall not be known.

To a church living in a difficult place. There are many of you living in difficult places. You may not live next to a heathen temple but your home is about as close to it in terms of being a hell. Yes, there are young people in this audience today who are in situations where they are readily exposed to spirit worship and demonic worship. Some of you, maybe, the psychological and emotional relationships that describe your family as if it were hell. Or maybe your situation at work or at school is in no sense ideal. Christ knows you're there. He knows you live there and he knows you can't escape from where you're at. He sees and he commends you for your loyalty to him in the midst of pressure. He asks you while you're under that pressure not to compromise. But to remain loyal to him and he will give you hidden manna and a white stone with your own name known only to you and to him written on it.

Father, we thank you today for your word, for the clarity it brings to our lives. That delicate balance of people that on the one hand are loving and caring and on the other hand have a firm grasp of what you approve and what you disapprove, of what builds up and what destroys. Help us, Lord, to be moral without being moralistic. To be good judges without being judgmental. Help us, Lord, to have backbones of iron and the touch of tenderness. Help us not to call right wrong or call wrong right. In a day when values and morals are so very confused and people do what is right in their own eyes. We have a Lord. His name is Jesus. He stands over us. The restrictions you place in our life are not meant for our pain or our constriction. They are meant for our happiness and joy for the preservation of life, for the values of the family, for the betterment of society. So we receive any restriction you bring on us with joy. We will not call right what you call wrong.

Lord, I pray especially for those in our congregation who are having a struggle with their loyalty to you versus a lot of other things that are in their life. I pray, Lord Jesus, that every one of us at the deepest level of our life will make a commitment to you that's so strong. We'll say, Lord, you're the most important person in my life. Your words are more important to me than anybody else's words. You're the only one who can give me eternal life. You're the only one who can teach me truly how to live. I want to serve you and love you with all my heart and mind and soul and strength. Bless those here today who too are living in difficult situations, where they're remaining loyal to you. And for those, Lord, who

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have compromised or whose loyalty to you has wavered, then help them today to develop the courage and the will to follow you with their whole heart and repent and bring again your pattern into their life. Thank you for speaking to us. Thank you for giving us the witness of your word. In your name. Amen.