

“NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH”
REVELATION 2:12-17

I would submit to you that the most dangerous people in the world today are not the ones who wear masks and carry guns and shout “Allahu Akbar.” The most dangerous people in the world today are those with winsome personalities and exceptional communication skills who can influence entire cultures and continents with lies—lies that are often camouflaged with compassion and common sense. I’m talking about people who have been given a platform to propagate their distorted perceptions of reality, their skewed concepts of right and wrong, and their twisted worldviews, but who have the resources and skills and sophistication to do it in a way that makes these lies seem benign.

I mention these people and these platforms simply to illustrate that the erosion of the Judeo-Christian values on which this country was founded has not come about primarily by forceful, in your face, militant methods, but by likeable people who have endeared themselves to us with their wit, their humor, their charisma, or their way with words. And that is why they are so dangerous. We are too often unaware that we are being influenced to believe their lies.

That’s why we are constantly admonished in Scripture to be on the lookout for false teachers, for the church’s vulnerability to deception has been one of Satan’s favorite strategies to diffuse the dynamic power of the Gospel. That was true of the church we will be looking at this morning.

Pergamum was the third city on the great circular road joining the seven cities of Asia. It was situated about 55 miles north of Smyrna, and, like Smyrna, was recognizable from far off because it was built on a steep, cone shaped hill that rose 1,000 feet from the Caicus Valley. So spectacular was Pergamum that it looked like a royal city in a fairy tale, only instead of having a castle on top of the hill, it had several temples, the most prominent of which was one dedicated to the Roman god Zeus. Just like the temple of Diana in Ephesus, this temple was so magnificent that it was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

Because of its location, Pergamum was not a commercial center like Ephesus or Smyrna, but it surpassed both of them in its cultural prominence. It had a library consisting of more than 200,000 volumes—manuscripts painstakingly written by hand on pieces of parchment, the skin of wild animals. In fact, that’s where the city got its name. Pergamum means ‘parchment.’

Because of this library, the city attracted intellectuals and philosophers from all over the world. It was a city where opinions and ideas were exchanged freely and frequently. Its inhabitants thrived on discourse and dialogue and debate and prided themselves on being open-minded.

Got some thoughts about the meaning of life, the origin of the universe, or the nature of the soul? Better yet, have you had any recent revelations or spiritual insights? Go to Pergamum. You’d have a forum in which to share your thoughts and ideas with people whose ears and minds were wide open.

But Pergamum was even better known for its religiosity. It contained world famous temples that attracted worshipers from great distances. I mentioned Zeus. Another was “Asklepios.” Asklepios, whose image or emblem is a serpent, was considered to be the god of healing. A person suffering from some ailment or illness might travel to Pergamum and go to the temple of Asklepios, where he would perform a prescribed ritual. Part of this ritual

included spending the night in the temple, which was crawling with snakes. It was believed that if while spending the night in the temple, you were fortunate enough to have a snake glide over your body you would be healed of your infirmity.

But another temple had even more serious implications. It was the temple built in honor of Trajan, the Roman Emperor, much like the one at Smyrna. Since Pergamum was the capital of Asia the residents fancied themselves enthusiastic supporters of Rome, and their devotion to Trajan, whom they considered a god, was unsurpassed. So, the temple was frequently visited by Pergamites, who confessed him as lord without reservation. And just like in Smyrna, this confession was mandatory for the citizens who lived in the city.

In light of these circumstances and this culture, Jesus identifies Himself in **verse 12**.
12 “And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of Him who has the sharp two-edged sword.’”

In John’s vision of Christ in chapter 1 Jesus is portrayed with this sharp, double-edged sword *protruding from his mouth*. When a double-edged sword is used metaphorically in Scripture, and especially in the New Testament, it refers to Truth—the Word of God. Jesus is saying, “I am the Truth. My opinions and my judgments are absolute. My decrees are sure and certain. My words are sharp and penetrating and they will expose error and deception.”

And this particular feature about Jesus has great relevance to his message to the church at Pergamum. Look at **verse 13a**. ***‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is.*** Who is Satan? Besides being a fallen angel who became the enemy of God when he rebelled, he was given dominion over this earth realm when he deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Satan is called the father of lies in Scripture. Because, according to Jesus, “the Truth will set you free,” Satan’s primary goal is to suppress and distort the Truth so that people will be kept in the dark, under his dominion, bound by lies.

As you might imagine, there is debate among scholars as to whether this was the literal dwelling place of Satan. Satan is a finite spirit being who, unlike God, is not omnipresent. He can only be one place at one time. I think that because of what Jesus says at the end of verse 13, Pergamum was, indeed, the literal residence or headquarters of Satan.

At the very least, there was an extraordinary concentration of his power and influence in Pergamum, perhaps because it was the official cult center for the worship of Caesar in this part of the world, or maybe because of Asklepios, the so-called god of healing—for Satan is also portrayed as a serpent in Scripture. But maybe it was because false teaching in general was so prevalent and so accessible in the city.

The point is, Jesus knew where these people lived - a city that was rife with demonic activity; a church that existed in a cauldron of lies; a community where Satan was doing his utmost to suppress the Truth. And the way to do that is by silencing Christ-followers, for the most threatening thing to the father of lies is the proclamation of the Truth - the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Satan used two methods to try to silence them. The first, his overt method, was persecution. He alludes to this in **Verse 13b**. ***Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.*** Satan was hoping that by afflicting enough pain and suffering believers would become so discouraged or so intimidated that they would be silent.

It is interesting, however, that persecution, more often than not, has been a context in which the church has thrived. Someone has said that Christians are like runner beans: Never better than when tied to a stake. You look in parts of the world even today where Christians are being persecuted and you can see a church that is dynamic and effective in advancing

the kingdom of Christ.

Here, in Pergamum, the people were true to the name of Jesus under such conditions. They would not let go of Jesus, even though it meant being oppressed and afflicted to the point of death. Tradition tells us that Antipas, because he refused to bend the knee to Caesar, was placed inside a brazen bowl, put over an open fire, and slowly roasted to death.

“How could he go through with it?” we ask. There can be only one reason. Because he loved Jesus more than life. He loved Him so much that it was unthinkable that he could publicly denounce Him. And that unswerving loyalty and singular devotion prompted the Lord to call him, “my faithful witness,” in the Greek, *μαρτυρ*, from which we get the word ‘martyr.’ And that devotion got Jesus’ attention, so much so that He singled him out by name and called everyone’s attention to him. “I know all about Antipas! I know what he endured. He’s my faithful witness!”

Can you imagine the reception Antipas received from the Lord when he departed Pergamum and went to Paradise? What a welcome! What a celebration! What a reward! Jesus commends him and others in Pergamum for their loyal devotion to Him.

However, he goes on in verse 14 to talk about something which was a serious threat to the church at Pergamum. **Verses 14-15.** *14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*

I mentioned that Satan’s overt method of silencing the church is persecution. More often, however, he uses covert methods, and history tells us that his covert methods are usually more effective. One of those methods is identified in these verses. It is the distortion and perversion of Truth.

Satan is very clever in this regard. He rarely introduces ideas that are nonsensical; he appeals to our sensibilities and affinities. He rarely announces his message in a bombastic manner (unless he can get away with it like he did with Hitler); he most often does it in a way that is subtle and seemingly benign.

In Pergamum, it was something Jesus called the teaching of Baalam. We know about Baalam and his teaching from Numbers 25. He was a sorcerer who was hired by the kings of Midian and Moab to pronounce a curse on the people of Israel shortly after they entered the Promised Land. But even though God put a halt to his devious scheme, Baalam did succeed in seducing the men of Israel to commit sexual immorality with Midianite women, culminating in the worship of pagan gods.

We read about this event, and we say, “How could this have happened? These people knew better. They knew how God felt about immorality and idolatry, and they knew the consequences of such behavior.” Obviously, Baalam had to be extremely cunning and crafty to seduce so many people. The word *“put a stumbling block,”* in verse 14, refers to a bait stick that is part of an animal trap. A hunter would lure that animal into that trap by setting a triggering device baited with some enticing scent.

That’s a good picture of what was happening to some of the Christians at Pergamum. They were being lured by the scent of something that appealed to some part of their sinful nature. We don’t know exactly what the enticement was. We know that the environment of this city was extremely sensual—that sexual immorality was part of the ritual in some of these pagan temples.

Many Bible scholars believe that the specific nature of the compromise is identified in verse 15—that is, the teaching of the Nicolaitans, and many believe that the teaching of the

Nicolaitans was the same as the teaching of Baalam—the latter being symbolic, the former being a literal sect begun by a man named Nicolaus who had an exaggerated view of Christian liberty.

Evidently Nicolaus was teaching that when God set us free, He abolished moral absolutes. The commandments, the law of God, the imperatives for living a holy life no longer applied to God's people. Freedom meant that Christians no longer have any moral restraint. They are free to do as they please.

“Are you a Christian? Live it up! Indulge your sensual appetites! Do what feels good! Do what you want to do and suppress your guilty conscience, because God has set you free!”

We hear about something like this and think, “That's ridiculous! Who would ever believe that kind of nonsense?”

But it's one thing to be able to identify the error several hundred years later. It's easy for me to point out the particulars of this false teaching. It's quite another to be in this situation, with all its sensuality, with all its persuasive rhetoric, with all its winsome proponents. Given the right circumstances and the right amount of pressure, given our own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, we, too, can be convinced of things that are absolutely contrary to God's will. Remember, we still have the remnants of our old nature, and it's part of that nature to believe lies.

Don't think for a minute that Satan is foolish enough to announce his message in a manner that betrays our sensibilities or pricks our consciences. He's too clever for that. He uses seemingly innocent, harmless half-truths; he uses the most sincere and likeable people to introduce his lies and do it in such a way that we never suspect that there might be any error or danger in them. He's an expert in making something wrong seem right, and he's had thousands of years to perfect his skill in doing so.

I lived in Canada on an Indian Reserve for a summer, where we had to get our water from a spigot coming out of a large tank in the middle of the village - a tank that had no top on it. We'd fill up our metal garbage can, carry it back to our little house, and several times a day we'd dip our glasses into that garbage can and enjoy a cool, refreshing drink of Canadian spring water.

After having lived there for six weeks or so, I decided one day to climb to the top of that water tank and take a look inside. When I did, I made quite a discovery. Inside that water tank were several thoroughly waterlogged cats and rats and several other unidentifiable vermin which had met an untimely death in our drinking supply.

Funny thing: I don't ever remember getting thirsty after that. Nobody in their right mind wants to subject their bodies to something that is obviously hazardous. But had I never made that discovery, I would never have known the truth. I would have continued to enthusiastically drink that water. After all, it looked clean. It tasted good. It quenched our thirsts. Yet all the while it was contaminated.

In the same way, our enemy's lies are often difficult to detect. If I made a list all of the ways I am aware of that Satan has seduced believers into believing his lies, we'd be here a long time. I could talk about the proliferation of the health and wealth gospel—that God wants all his children to be prosperous and live lives that are free of pain. But let me mention another false teaching to which some of us in our tradition are more susceptible.

There has emerged, in the last few generations, a view of Christianity that goes something like this: You can be a Christian and essentially live however you please. You can strike a peace treaty with the world, the flesh, and the devil - you don't have to contend,

resist, or deny. Sure, it's better if you do, but as long as you can point to a time in your life when you made a decision, walked an aisle, filled out a card, or prayed a prayer - you're safe. You can live however you please on earth and still go to heaven. You may not go first class; you may not have many rewards, but you'll get there, even if you smell like smoke.

That's an erroneous view of both justification and sanctification, and it's taught nowhere in the Scriptures. The Bible says, *"faith without works is dead"* (James 2:17). The Bible says *"no one who continues to sin has been born of God"* (1 John 3:9), and *"without holiness no man will see the Lord"* (Hebrews 12:14). The Bible says *"those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their sinful natures with its passions and desires"* (Gal. 5:24).

We make a huge mistake when we give assurance of salvation to a person based upon a decision he/she made way back when - a decision that has no bearing upon the rest of his/her life. According to Scripture, *"[Jesus] redeemed us from all wickedness in order to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good"* (Tit. 2:14).

You want to do your own thing? You want to live by your own rules? You want to love the world and do what the world does? You'd better understand the consequences. You can do those things but please don't call yourself a Christian. If you've got any assurance of salvation from that kind of lifestyle it didn't come from the Word of God. It came from God's enemy, the devil. That's the kind of lie that he propagates.

Jesus takes error and sin very seriously, and so should we. Yes, I know we're supposed to be tolerant and non-judgmental and open-minded and all the rest. But Jesus has never changed His view on these matters. That's why He says in **verse 16**. *Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*

When Jesus calls the church to repent, He is asking them to renounce the lies they have adopted either intentionally or unintentionally. Lies about who Jesus is and what He demands of them. Lies about morality. Lies about Caesar and their relationship with Rome. Repentance, in this context, means identifying those lies and forsaking them - making a radical course correction.

Please note, that should they refuse to repent, Jesus would not be happy. *"I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."* Jesus does not take false teaching lightly. Those who believe and propagate Satan's lies will find themselves confronted by a sword—the sword of Jesus' mouth. And I take this to be not only the sword of Truth, but the sword of judgment.

Verse 17a. *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.* Jesus is referencing an ancient Jewish tradition which stated that to eat "hidden manna" meant to enjoy the blessings when Messiah came and established His kingdom.

Verse 17b. *I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.* The winners of athletic competitions at this time were often rewarded with a white stone, inscribed with their name. That stone gave them free admission to many of the events and amenities of their city.

Jesus promises a white stone - free admission to all his blessings - if we overcome. And that new name is His name, for we have access to eternal life not because of our victory, but because of His. He conquered sin and Satan when He died on the cross and rose from the grave. And the Bible says we are more than conquerors through Him.

Friends, do you know this Jesus personally? Do you know Him in truth? I'm not asking if you know Him by name or reputation. I'm not asking if you've grown up in a Christian family

or in the church and heard enough about Him to know that He is God. I'm not even asking if you remember making a decision to ask Him to come into your heart at some discernable point in your life. I'm asking if Jesus is to you what Jesus intended to be to all those He came to save. The God of Absolute Truth. The Lord of your heart who reigns without a rival. The King of your life who has your wholehearted allegiance and undivided loyalty.

Can you say with absolute certainty, "I will one day partake of this hidden manna? I will be given a white stone with his name written on it"? You can if you hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Don't leave today without being sure where you stand in relation to Jesus. He's not Someone to fool around with. He's the One who has a sharp double-edged sword - the One who will use that sword to judge the living and the dead.

Nothing but the Truth

Revelation 2:12-17

Main Idea: Cleverly disguised distortions of the truth are a serious threat to a church's health and holiness, and Jesus will most certainly judge those who propagate them

Pergamum: A spectacular city



Jesus identifies Himself (12)

The city where Satan lived (13)
Literal dwelling place?

The city's many temples

The persecution of the church

The infiltration of false teaching (14-15)
The teaching of Balaam

The teaching of the Nicolaitans

The intolerance of Jesus and the threat of judgment (16)

Rewards for overcomers (17)
Hidden manna

White stone