



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

The Letter to Pergamum
Revelation 2:12-17

This Lord's Day we will continue to read our mail. Two weeks ago we read the letter from the Lord to the church in Ephesus, and last week we read the letter to Smyrna. Originally these letters were addressed to specific churches along the Asia Minor preaching circuit, but they were recorded in the Book of Revelation, because this is our mail now.

Today's letter to the church in Pergamum could have special significance to us for Pergamum was a university town. It housed one of the world's largest libraries. The library had tens of thousands of books, but what is impressive is that 2,000 years ago all their books were hand written and catalogued without the use of computers.

Today's letter follows the same formula of the other six letters. It is addressed to the angel of the church, followed by a symbolic description of Christ, in this case **“the one who has a sharp two-edged sword,”** followed by the unique content of the letter. Listen as I read the letter which contains the Word of God.

Revelation 2:12-17:

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Pergamum. This is the message from the one who has a sharp two-edged sword:

I know that you live in the city where the great throne of Satan is located, and yet you have remained loyal to me.

And you refused to deny me even when Antipas, my faithful witness, was martyred among you by Satan's followers. And yet I have a few complaints against you. You tolerate some among you who are like Balaam, who showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to worship idols by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin. In the same way, you have some Nicolaitians among you -- people who follow the same teachings and commit the same sins.

“Repent, or I will come to you suddenly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

“Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Everyone who is victorious will eat of the manna that has been hidden away in heaven. And I will give to each one a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.”

Two quick notes. First, the Pergamum Church remains faithful to Christ in a city where the “great throne of Satan is located.” No one can say for sure what this is, except as Barclay points out that on a hillside outside of town is a huge stone that was called the Altar of Zeus.

Second, there is mention of Antipas, who because of to his faithful witness was martyred. Tradition informs us that he was burned to death. Yes, the opening verses of the letter tell us of a church that was persecuted, yet they continued to be Christ’s faithful witnesses.

The church in Pergamum is like the tenacious little bulldog that found its way into the backyard of a salesman. This salesman owned two setters that he trained and kept in the backyard. One morning, an ornery little bulldog came shuffling and snorting down the alley. He crawled under the fence into the backyard and it was easy to see he meant business. The salesman’s first impulse was to take his setters and lock them in the basement so they wouldn’t attack the little bulldog. But he decided he would allow his setters to teach the bulldog a lesson the intruder would never forget.

The dogs got into a scuffle that went round and round and round! When the little bulldog had enough he squeezed under the fence and took off down the alley. For the rest of the day he licked his wounds. The next day at the same time, here came that same ornery little bulldog -- back under the fence and after the setters. Once again those two bird dogs beat the stuffing out of that little bowlegged animal and would have chewed him up if he hadn’t retreated down the alley. The next day he was back! Same time, same station, same results.

The salesman had to leave for a trip to the east coast and was gone several weeks. When he came back, he asked his wife about the little bulldog. She said, “Honey, you will not believe what’s happened. Every day, at the same time, that little bulldog came back into the backyard and fought with our two setters. He didn’t miss a day! And it has come to the point that when our setters simply hear that bulldog snorting down the alley they immediately start whining and run down into the basement. Now that little bulldog struts around our backyard like he owns it.”

The early church: persecuted, small, insignificant, looked down upon, ridiculed, remained faithful in its witness. They showed up in the backyard of Rome every day with the love of Christ, and in the end you know who won the battle between Christianity and the Roman Empire. It was not Rome with its military might, but the love of Christ. Without a shot the Empire fell and Christ was the victor.

God uses our persistence and our faithfulness to give hope, to bring peace and to make God's love known so that in our lives we can do that for which we were made, that is to live out our lives to the glory of God.

However, the history of the church is not pretty, for once the church was recognized by Rome and eventually became the state religion, the new found power and wealth of the church corrupted it. Actually, the church has always had to deal with corruption. There are no perfect churches. As Dr. Shelton told us at seminary, "Never join a perfect church, because when you do, it will no longer be perfect."

The Pergamum church was faithful, and like a tenacious bulldog they witnessed about Jesus, but they had their problems. They tolerated those who were like Balaam and the Nicolaitans who worshipped idols and committed sexual sin. Well, who on earth were those who were like Balaam and the Nicolaitans?

I told part of the story of Balaam to our children this morning. I have to admit that Balaam has taken a bad rap over the years. He was not part of the horde of Jews wandering out in the wilderness, waiting to enter the Promised Land, but still he knew something of God.

We first meet Balaam in Numbers 22. Balak, the king of Moab, climbed a mountain and saw a horde of Israelites on his plain. They were so numerous that Balak feared they would dethrone him, so he sent a delegation to Balaam asking Balaam to come and curse the Israelites. Balaam sought God and God told him not to go with the delegation. Balak sent more dignitaries to fetch Balaam, and this time Balaam was allowed to go, but he insisted that he could only do what God told him to do. On the way we have the story of the talking donkey, which emphasized to Balaam that he could only do what God told him. To make a long story short, Balaam never cursed the Jews, but to Balak's displeasure, Balaam blessed the Jews.

Everything mentioned about Balaam in Numbers 22 and 23 speak of a prophet who honors God, yet there is one verse later in Numbers 31 that says that Balaam caused the people of Israel to rebel against the Lord.

The New Testament writers who refer to Balaam are influenced by an oral tradition that is not in the Old Testament. This oral tradition was passed down and quoted in the Letter to Pergamum: **“Balaam taught them to worship idols by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sins.”**

I was not exactly sure where to go with this text. What does the Balaam’s temptation have to do with the church today? We do not eat food offered to idols, but the sexual sins, well that applies. Sexual promiscuity has been part of every culture from day one. Maybe Demosthenes gives us a good picture of what times were like in the Roman Empire when he wrote, “We have 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 for having a faithful guardian of our household affairs.” Demosthenes was not saying anything which was in the least shocking; he was in fact laying down the accepted pattern of sexual life.

The problem in the church at Pergamum was toleration of those who followed the way of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. That is, the church tolerated societal norms that were in conflict with its moral tradition. I wonder if what the text may be teaching the church today is to beware of allowing our surrounding culture a place higher than Christ in defining the norms of the church.

It would be easy to say, “We in the church should shape our culture and not allow our culture to shape the church.” “The Bible says it, I believe it, so that settles it.” So we condemn everything we hear on the news or watch on television and say, “America’s only hope is prayer.” “America’s only hope is for our culture to get back to the good ol’ days when people believed the Bible and prayed.” Well, there is something to that. Our nation would do well to pray more and be guided by the Bible, but the problem arises when we pick and choose what part of the Bible to apply to our culture. “Let’s just quote some verses, ‘you shall not..., you shall..., do it this way..., and send in your pledge.’”

What is hard is to study scripture; I mean really study it and let the entire message of the Bible affect our lives. Then as we live by Biblical standards, who knows, we may have an effect on our culture. But I must warn you, it is not easy.

For example, sometimes I am afraid the church is more interested in expressing our piety than standing for biblical understanding of justice that was

expressed by Jesus and the prophets. We are more interested in legislating morality than working for a society where everyone has their basic human needs met. We are more interested in controlling the lives of others than allowing Jesus to control our lives. So let's skip over all that Scripture says about showing grace to the alien and rationalize the way our laws treat them. Who cares that their lives are in danger? They are having a negative effect on our standard of living.

We want to influence society with the teaching of Scripture; well, let's turn to the prophet Amos. Amos judged a culture where the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. He judged a society where the rich had their way in the courts and the poor didn't have a chance. He judged a culture where religious folks who said they loved God lived in luxury, while the poor lost hope.

Let me read you a sampling of verses from Amos to the comfortable religious folks. Amos wrote, **"They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed."**

To the wives of the religious folks Amos wrote, **"Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, 'Bring us some drinks!'"**

To the rich Jews he wrote: **"You people trample on the poor and force him to give you grain. You lie on beds inlaid with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph."**

Then those most famous words of Amos: **"But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"**

It is easy to judge the promiscuity and idolatry in our culture, but if you believe Amos, our problems run much deeper. For it is not easy changing culture when the religious folks still have a long way to go. Our nation has a problem with morality, but greed and injustice can be our most dangerous immoralities.

What about the teaching the morality of the New Testament? Yes, there are places where Paul came down hard on folks who were committing sexual sins, but we also read in First John, **"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"**

There are those who say that America's only hope is prayer, and consider what Jesus taught us to pray, **“Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”** I don't know how to make this prayer a reality, especially when I read Amos and the words John. I am not smart enough, but I do know that both the church and our culture have a long way to go. And I know that if we want to change our culture, all we can do is to allow what we know about God to guide our decisions and then leave the results to God.

So, my brothers and sisters, with the tenacity of a bulldog, with the drive of the Pergamum church that remained faithful under persecution in a world of idolatry and sexual promiscuity, seek God's guidance, read the word, pray, allow the Spirit to work through you and then leave the results of changing our culture to God.