

Main Idea: In Revelation 2:12-17, Christ called on a church that tolerated sin to reflect on three truths.

- I. Christ wants us to reflect on the truth about Him (12).
 - A. He is just.
 - B. He knows the truth.
 - II. Christ wants us to reflect on the truth about ourselves (13-16).
 - A. Christ commended the church (13).
 1. He knew about their circumstances.
 2. He knew about their commitment.
 3. He knew about their conflict.
 - B. Christ confronted the church (14-15).
 1. They were guilty of compromise (14).
 2. They were guilty of indifference (15).
 - C. Christ called on them to change (16).
 - III. Christ wants us to reflect on the truth about His offer (17).
- Implications: What must we do?
1. We must deal with sin in our own lives.
 2. We must deal with sin in our church.
 3. We must know that if we don't, He will.

Ponder the following statement, "A new Decalogue has been adopted by the neo-Christians of our day, 'Thou shalt not disagree,' and a new set of Beatitudes too, 'Blessed are they that tolerate everything, for they shall not be made accountable for anything.' A. W. Tozer wrote that years ago, but he was certainly describing our day.¹ One of the common buzzwords in our day is the word "toleration." Compromise is like a cancer that is eating away the church.

Charles Colson tells of sitting at dinner with a president of one of the three major television networks.² Colson saw this as a great opportunity to influence the man, so he told him how millions of Christians were offended by the network's programming. Knowing that TV executives have an intense interest in profit, Colson suggested that it would be good business to air wholesome family entertainment. Colson underscored, "After all, there are fifty million born-again Christians out there." Do you know what happened? The man looked Colson in the eye and the following exchange took place.

"What you are suggesting, Mr. Colson, is that we run more programs like, say, 'Chariots of Fire'?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed. "That's a great movie with a marvelous Christian message."

"Well," he said, "CBS ran it as a prime-time movie just a few months ago. Are you aware of the ratings?"

All at once I knew I was in trouble.

He then explained: That night NBC showed 'On Golden Pond'; it was #1 with 25.2% of all TV sets in America tuned in. Close behind was 'My Mother's Secret Life', a show about a mother hiding her past as a prostitute. It was #2 with 25.1%. And a distant third--a big money loser--was CBS with 'Chariots of Fire'--11.8%. In fact, of the 65 shows rated that week, 'Dallas' was #1, 'Chariots of Fire', #57."

*** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ from *Israel My Glory*, Dec 94/Jan 95, p. 20

² K. Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, 73-4

"So," my companion concluded, "where are your 50 million born-again Christians, Mr. Colson?"

And Colson remarks, "Good question. Where are we? If even half of Gallup's 50 million born-again Christians had watched the show with the Christian message, 'Chariots of Fire' would have topped the ratings. But the disturbing truth, as studies by the secular networks as well as the Christian Broadcasting Network show, is that viewing habits of Christians are no different than those of non-Christians!"

My friends, this is sobering news. Christians in America--this includes us--have lost their ability to discern. An attitude of laxity and toleration has lulled us to sleep. To a great degree, the church has lost its saltiness, and replaced it with toleration. I'm not talking about tolerating sin "out there," but "in here," in our own lives.

What does the Lord think of a church that tolerates sin? We find out in Revelation 2, in the third of Jesus' letters to the seven churches. The church at Pergamum was a church that tolerated sin in its midst. What did the Lord have to say to them and to us? Let's find out. In Revelation 2:12-17, Christ called on a church that tolerated sin to reflect on three truths.

By the way, this is not a text to endorse the need to clean up the *world*. That's not our mission. This letter calls on the church to clean up *the church*.

I. Christ wants us to reflect on the truth about Him (12).

In each of the seven letters in Revelation 2-3, the Lord begins with a description of Himself. To the church at Ephesus, He is revealed as "the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (1)," thus highlighting His strength and sovereignty. To the Smyrnan church, He identified Himself as "the first and the last, who was dead and is alive (8)," underscoring His permanence and power.

To the church at Pergamum, Christ said this in verse 12, "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword." What an interesting description! What does it tell us about the Lord, and why is this particular description fitting for the church at Pergamum?

First, consider this about the city of Pergamum. Pergamum was located sixty-five miles north of Smyrna. It was a very wealthy city, famous for a library of 200,000 volumes. It was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Geographically, it gave the impression of a royal city for it was situated on a tall hill, with the Mediterranean Sea visible 15 miles away. It was known for its culture and architectural beauty. And its moral wickedness.

The city had a host of pagan religions. The great altar dedicated to the chief Greek savior-god, Zeus Olympus, was in Pergamum. There was also an altar to Athena, patron goddess of Athens. The shrine of Asklepios, the god of healing, attracted people from all over the world. More significantly, Pergamum was the official center in Asia for the imperial cult. They worshipped the Roman emperor. Pergamum was the first city in Asia to receive permission to build a temple to a living Caesar (in AD 29 Augustus granted the city authorization to erect a temple to his honor).

Think of what it was like to be a Christian in Pergamum. All citizens were required to burn a pinch of incense at the foot of Caesar's statue, to honor him as a god.

Those who refused were immediately arrested and imprisoned. No questions asked. Rome had the power of the sword.

But were the Romans really in control? No. Notice who really held the sword, verse 12, “These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” Christ holds the sword. The sword was used for both protection against an enemy and to eliminate an enemy. The sword speaks of judgment. Here we see two traits of Christ.

A. He is just.

The church at Pergamum needed to know that they had no reason to fear the Roman sword. Christ held the real sword. This speaks of His justice, holiness, and awesome authority and might. He is the judge. The *Bible Knowledge Commentary* observes, “The sword is a symbolic representation of the Word of God's twofold ability to separate believers from the world and to condemn the world for its sin. It was the sword of salvation as well as the sword of death.”

Hebrews 4:12—“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper 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.”

Never forget this. Christ is the One who takes action against sin and evil. He holds the sword. He is just. Another trait is highlighted in verse 13.

B. He knows the truth.

Verse 13—“I know where you live.” The KJV renders it, “I know thy works.” He is just and He knows. He knows the truth. We'll see what He said He knew in a moment, but for now consider this. If we're going to break out of the mold of laxity and toleration of sin that prevails in our day, we need to reflect on the truth about Christ. He is just, and He knows the truth. There's no fooling Him.

“Why doesn't God do something?” we may wonder at times. “Doesn't He see the injustice I'm experiencing?” Yes. He sees. But know this. This is the age of suffering. As with our Savior, so with us. First comes the cross, then the crown.

II. Christ wants us to reflect on the truth about ourselves (13-16).

Notice that Christ had two things to say about the church at Pergamum.

A. Christ commended the church (13).

In verse 13 the Lord said, “I know.” What is it that Christ knows? In the case of the Pergamum church, Christ knew and commended them in three areas.

1. He knew about their circumstances.

Verse 13 reads, “I know where you live—where Satan has his throne...” [KJV “I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's throne is”]. Wow! The church was living on enemy territory. Satan is a created being, a former worship of the true God that rebelled, wanting to usurp the place of God. God cast him from heaven and pronounced his certain doom. Satan has a throne, too. He works through government leaders according to this verse. He had a throne in the city of Pergamum.

Notice the same thought used again at the end of verse 13, “...in your city—where Satan lives.” In other words, “You dwell where Satan dwells!” Satan is not tucked away in hell. He's on the prowl in the world, as a “roaring lion” (1 Pet 5:8).

The Lord knew the circumstances His people were facing. He knew about their encounters with the forces of evil. Here was a church located in a city described as the

very "throne" of Satan. Some think this is a reference to the altar of Zeus. Others think it refers to the fact that Pergamum was the center of Emperor worship in the east. The point is that the church was on enemy turf, and Christ knew it.

2. *He knew about their commitment.*

Of the church Christ said (13), "Yet you remain true to my name" [KJV "And thou holdest fast my name"]. It wasn't easy, but they remained true to the name of Christ. They possessed a strong commitment, which the Lord saw.

3. *He knew about their conflict.*

Verse 13—"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..." Who was Antipas? We don't know much. We do know that he said "no" to the world, stood up for the testimony of Christ, and shed his blood as a martyr. One legend says he was slowly roasted to death in a brazen bull during the reign of Domitian.

Consider that phrase again, "I know where you live" [KJV 'where thou dwellest']. It's unusual to use this of Christians. Usually, the word used of Christians is "sojourner"--we're just passing through. But the word "dwell" means "to have one's permanent residence in a place." Christ says to these believers, "I know where you have your permanent residence, in Pergamum." The point is this. There's a dangerous tendency Christians face when they see the world's moral decay, and that is to retreat and hide.

I don't agree with all his theology, but William Barclay hits the nail on the head with this reminder, "We may feel it would be very much easier to be a Christian in some other place and in some other circumstances but the duty of the Christian is to witness for Christ where life has set him...If in the early days Christians had run away every time they were confronted with a difficult engagement, there would have been no chance of a world for Christ."³ Christ didn't intend for us to hide the light in a monastery. He expects us to live for him where He put us. Yes, right here in Scioto County. On the job. In the classroom. On the playing field. In our neighborhood.

Sometimes we're inclined to think, "I could *really* live for Christ IF ONLY I had a different job, or lived in a different neighborhood, or went to a different school..." Hold on. The Lord calls us to live for Him right where we are. Even if there's persecution? Yes, especially if there is, for it's then that the reality of true Christianity shines the brightest.

The Pergamum church sounds like quite a church, doesn't it? They were willing to suffer and stand for Christ, even unto death. Christ knew their circumstances, their commitment, even their conflict, and He commended them for it. Here's a church free of problems, right? Hold on. It's possible to have zeal yet lack knowledge, courage yet be in need of discernment. Indeed, there was another side to the church which could not be overlooked.

B. Christ confronted the church (14-15).

The first words of verse 14 are tragic, "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you." What was it that Christ had against the church? They were guilty of two sins which come under the umbrella of tolerance.

1. *They were guilty of compromise (14).*

³ Barclay, p. 91

Here's what the church had done. Verse 14—"You have people there who hold to the teaching of [KJV 'doctrine of'] Balaam." Notice the problem was not overt. It wasn't that the majority of the church membership was practicing blatant sin, rather, it was that they tolerated in their midst people who taught and practiced sin. They compromised the integrity of the church by allowing the "doctrine of Balaam."

Who was Balaam? We read about him in Numbers 22-25. Balaam was the prophet who was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to curse Israel, but failed on three occasions. So he came up with a sinister plan. He prompted the men of Israel to sin through intermarriage with heathen women and through idol-worship (see: Num 22-25; 31:15-16). Satan couldn't touch Israel through the front door, so he came in the back.

From verse 14 (and from the account in Numbers) we learn that Balaam enticed Israel in three ways. First, through mixed marriages (Satan attacks the integrity of the family any chance he can). Second, he enticed them to "eat things sacrificed to idols." And third, he used the lure of fornication (sexual sin). Balaam may have been dead and gone, but the spirit of Balaam was alive and well in Pergamum.

Warren Wiersbe points out (574), "Satan had not been able to destroy them by coming as the roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), but he was making inroads as the deceiving serpent." Remember, Satan's #1 tool is deceit. He loves to sugar-coat his deadly intent with a religious veneer. His strategy is a simple though subtle one that's been around for centuries. It involves compromise.

What does that story have to do with what was happening in Pergamum? In the case of Balaam, compromised thinking led to compromised living. So in Pergamum. The church tolerated people who taught the "doctrine of Balaam," and this teaching was taking a deadly toll.

We can conjecture what was happening. A group of church members were spouting their opinions, "Get with the times! What's wrong with cooperating with Rome? What harm can there be in burning a tiny pinch of incense to Caesar? Think of the good that will come of it. They'll applaud us instead of killing us. We can win their favor, and maybe win them to Christ. What's the problem with a little give-and-take?"

As believers in the 21st century, we face the same temptation. Every day we must decide whether we're going to yield to ungodly compromise, which leads to personal advancement, or stay unyieldingly true to Christ, and suffer the consequences.

"Food sacrificed to idols" (14) can refer to one of two things. First, it could be meat that was purchased in the public market, meat that had previously been sacrificed in a pagan temple and then was sold to the market (that's what Paul deals with in 1 Cor 8). More likely, it refers to feasts conducted in the temples in honor of various gods.

What would you do if, while living in first century Pergamum, you received the following invitation from your unsaved neighbor?

"Dear Joe, I request the honor of your presence at a banquet--filet mignon will be served--to be held next Tuesday, in honor of Asclepius, the serpent-god of healing, to be held at the temple of Asclepius. RSVP."

Would you "offend" your neighbor and decline, or would you go? Apparently, some members of the church at Pergamum chose to go. They were guilty of compromise.

Do your peers know your loyalty is to Christ at the coffee pot at work, or at the teachers lounge, or at the rec center?

2. *They were guilty of indifference (15).*

Verse 15—“Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” [KJV adds, ‘which thing I hate’]. Who were the Nicolaitans? We don't know much about them. Jesus mentioned them back in 2:6. Apparently, they were people who mixed faith in Christ with antinomianism (no need for moral laws). They talked a lot about freedom. This we do know for sure. Christ hated their doctrine and practice, but the church was taking an indifferent, tolerant attitude towards what the Lord hated! That's serious.

There is no question that we have seen a decline in morals in our society. Even so, it's hard for us to imagine the moral condition in the Roman world. If we think that religion and morality went hand in hand in that day, we're wrong. In the ancient world, immoral behavior was not only practiced, but promoted, and that in the name of religion.

For instance (see Ladd, 48), not far from Antioch where the first Gentile church arose was a beautiful get-away called Daphne. It was a favorite retreat oasis for the wealthy citizens of Antioch, and even Roman governors visited the place. There was a thick grove of cypresses and bay trees, and the landscape was adorned with beautiful fountains. This was no mere Shawnee state lodge, however, for Daphne contained a temple dedicated to the Roman gods Apollo and Diana. More notably, Daphne was famous for the presence of temple prostitutes. The Romans endorsed base, immoral practices in the name of relaxation and religion. Immorality was accepted. It was "normal" to be lax. The average person on the street saw absolutely nothing wrong with indulging in sexual practices outside of marriage.

Sound familiar? Here was the second crime of the Pergamum church. Indifference towards morality was creeping into the church. The Nicolaitans were promoting their "live and let live" teaching, and the church leaders and church members stood idly by and did nothing about it.

Guess what Christ did?

C. Christ called on them to change (16).

Consider an important question. Whose responsibility is it to keep a church pure? Please don't miss the thrust of verse 16, “Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” In other words, "Repent or else."

Don't miss this. The WHOLE church is called on to repent. Not just the ones who taught false doctrine. Not just the ones who practiced immoral behavior. The whole church needed to repent. Why? Not everyone was guilty of following the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans, but the whole church was guilty of tolerating it!

What would happen if they didn't deal with their toleration of sin? Christ said, “Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” Notice carefully, if the church didn't repent Christ said two things would happen. One, He would deal with the church ("I will come to YOU"). Two, He would deal with the problem affecting the church ("fight against them"--lit. "to make war").

This is serious. Christ says to His church, "Either you take care of the problem or I will! Either you get rid of the sin in your midst or I will come and do it!"

What does this teach us about Christ? He is love, yes, but He hates sin.

And what does this teach us about ourselves? We must be loving, yes, but we must also be firm in dealing with sin. Think about it. What do you tolerate in your home?

III. Christ wants us to reflect on the truth about His offer (17).

The Lord makes an amazing, gracious offer in verse 17, an offer to all who will "overcome" and break out of the mold and stop tolerating sin—"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."

The Lord says He will give something to those who break rank with the world and live for Him. "To him that overcomes I will give..." Three privileges are offered: hidden manna, a white stone, and a stone with a new name. All three are privileges associated with the Messianic kingdom. Moses hid manna in the ark to remind Israel of God's faithfulness (Ex 16:33-34). To the Jew, "to eat of the hidden manna" meant to enjoy the blessings of the Messianic kingdom.

Notice the contrast here. The Nicolaitans ate food sacrificed to idols and were doomed to be judged by the sword of the Lord. Those who overcome the world will be entitled to eat the hidden manna, the bread of heaven.

What is a "white stone"? In the ancient world, white stones were given for a variety of reasons, two of which are significant here. First, jurors used to give a stone to a person at the end of his trial--a white stone indicating acquittal, a black one guilt. Second, white stones were used as tickets of admission to public festivals. This symbolism fits the context of Jesus' words to the church at Pergamum. To gain entrance to the greatest of all public festivals, the Messianic feast, one must have a white stone. The white stone belongs only to those who are overcomers.

Implications: What must we do?

Since overcomers are people who refuse to tolerate sin, what must we do? It boils down to three decisions. Obviously, the first is...

1. We must deal with sin in our own lives.

Beloved, if we love Christ, we must hate sin. The two go hand in hand. Is there sin in your life? Then forsake that sin today by confessing it to Christ. But there's another decision we must make...

2. We must deal with sin in our church.

How? The Lord gave us a means to keep His church pure. It's called church discipline. Sin is not to be tolerated, but rooted out. We must not ignore sin, but deal with it. Why? Because of #3...

3. We must know that if we don't, He will.