

September 22, 2024, *Revelation 2:12-16*

The churches that Jesus is addressing through John are all in what was known as “Asia Minor,” which is now western Turkey. Asia Minor was, in some ways, similar to Wisconsin. Ephesus, which we talked about two weeks ago, was a bit like Green Bay. Ephesus had that huge, beautiful temple to the goddess Artemis, and most people in Asia Minor worshiped Artemis and made pilgrimages to that temple. In the same way, most people in Wisconsin attempt to make a pilgrimage to Green Bay to see the Packers which, it hurts me to say this, is likely the “god” of many people in Wisconsin. Smyrna, which we talked about yesterday, is a bit like Milwaukee: a great, big city with a lot of people, thriving businesses and great architecture and a beautiful landscape with a large body of water. Today, Jesus addresses the church in Pergamum, which was kind of an ancient Madison. Pergamum was the capital city of Asia Minor- so this was the seat of the Roman government in that area. It was home to the area’s leading medical school. It was home to a large library, filled with scribes and scholars and all kinds of learned people. It was, in a sense, the “throne” of that region because that was the capital city. According to Jesus, it was also where the “throne” of Satan was. What does he mean by that? Jesus is saying that although the Romans ruled this city, really it was Satan that was in charge. Satan was the one who tricked these people into thinking that their idols could bless them if they did enough to appease them. Satan was the one who tricked these people into worshipping Roman emperors. Satan was the one who fooled these otherwise gifted, intelligent people into thinking that if they practiced fertility with sacred prostitutes in the temples, then certain gods and goddesses would bless the land with fertile fields and families. Satan was the one who duped people into thinking that men were more important, more trustworthy, more privileged than women, so they could run around on their wives and that was okay. They didn’t know it, but the people of Pergamum were under the influence and control of Satan, but that was slowly starting to change- because now Jesus’ church had reached Pergamum and people were coming to a knowledge of the truth and being saved.

Jesus tells us how he was defeating Satan, through the sword of his mouth- the Word. The Bible! Yes! The way that Jesus wins soul after soul from Satan’s slavery is through the Bible, the message of the Bible, that Jesus is a different kind of God, who sacrificed himself so you could be forgiven and made whole, and by believing in him, no works, no sacrifice on your part, just believe, you can be saved! Jesus saves people and defeats Satan one soul at a time through that message, and Jesus is assuring his people of that, and they believed that. That’s why, although they faced similar death threats and poverty and hardship like the Christians in other places, they remained strong- even when one of their Christians, Antipas, was executed! Jesus calls him a martyr, a witness, meaning that Antipas had seen the goodness, the mercy of Jesus, and when the leaders of Pergamum told him either to denounce Jesus- likely by worshipping Caesar like in other cities, or burn, he chose to burn rather than denounce the God who loved him. You may have noticed a common theme between the churches we’ve been talking about- they are persecuted by the Roman government that demands that Caesar be worshiped, and the Christians refuse and they are threatened with violence for it- and these Christians in Pergamum stand strong, and Jesus praises them for it!

But, unlike the Christians from last week, Jesus has something they need to work on. It’s not that they are turning prideful and hateful, forgetting that Christians are also called to love- like the church in Ephesus did. No, their issue is this: Compromising with the culture. The church in

Pergamum was being infiltrated by a group called the Nicolaitans, which we mentioned briefly two weeks ago because they were in Ephesus as well. The Nicolaitans were this group of people within Christianity that were particularly destructive. It's not that they went around saying, "Jesus isn't really God," or "The Bible is nonsense, don't read it." They were more subtle. They would say, "Of course we are Christian! Of course we believe in Jesus. Of course the Bible is God's Word! We believe all of it- and it says God is a God of love! It says that Jesus saves our souls and our bodies are going to die and go into the ground! Therefore, it doesn't really matter what you do with your bodies, as long as your soul stays pure." In a Greco-Roman culture where men were allowed and expected to have sexual relationships outside of marriage- and anyone who taught differently was seen as strict and repressive and close-minded, the Christians would have been tempted to fall into that, and the Nicolaitan teachers said, "what's the big deal? It's just something you do with your body, it's not that bad." In a time and place where cities like Pergamum would have big festivals where animals were sacrificed to the gods and then the meat was distributed and all the people would worship the gods by eating that meat, and the Christians would have been tempted to join in, the Nicolaitans said, "Go for it! It's just food! It's not like you're actually worshiping these gods. It's good to show that you're a part of the community- maybe people will actually like Christians more and think about coming to our churches!" Jesus says, "You need to repent. Now. You need to change and ask God for his forgiveness for dishonoring him, and if you don't, then you are going to war with me." What does Jesus mean by that? It means that you will be on the wrong side of Jesus' judgment. The truth is that Jesus is absolutely, unendingly merciful, compassionate, and gracious, but he will not be mocked. Because he loves his people so deeply, anyone who twists his words or leads his children away from him will not get away with it, and that includes people who claim to be Christians. Jesus will go to war with anyone who twists or ignores his Word and leads people away from him. But to those who are victorious, his people who trust in him and are faithful to his Word, they will be sustained- the hidden manna, the bread of Heaven, Jesus is going to keep them going no matter what happens to them, and they are going to be his people forever.

1. Satan Destroys Churches Through Doctrinal Compromise.

A few months ago, I saw a scary movie that was meant to be as disturbing and unsettling as possible. It involved gruesome murder, and in the end the nasty twist was that Satan worshippers were behind it all. We often think that when Satan is at work, it's big, scary, nasty, and violent. Not always. Jesus reminds his people about the Israelites back in the desert before they came into Israel, and he reminds them that Balaam, who was certainly in league with Satan, couldn't curse the people, so he instead told Israel's enemies to pull them away from God with sex and idolatry, and it worked. In Pergamum, Satan was pulling Christians away in the same way, not through violence or swords, but charming teachers who just seem to make a lot of sense, who say exactly what people want to hear, leading husbands to run around on their wives and worship bloodthirsty, cruel, vicious gods, and it would destroy Jesus' church. The same is true today- especially for us. Pick your poison. In a country where people make politicians their god, trust in politicians to save them, save their country, make everything great, give them the good life, Christians, churches, pastors are influenced by Satan to put their trust and hope in politicians, in their nation, and they either end up power hungry or fearful and even violent toward others who dare disagree. In a culture that prioritizes freedom and autonomy, Christians and churches are tempted to echo their culture and say, "It's your money, it's your time, if you have time for church, if you have enough room in the budget to give, then that's great but don't feel obliged,"

where the Bible teaches us that our property, our lives, our time here are all gifts that God gives for us to use to bless others, that our lives are not meant to be lived for ourselves, but in service to our God and our neighbor. The Bible teaches us that our bodies are gifts from God, we are not our own, we were bought at a price, and what we do with our bodies matters, and everything we do must be in accord with God's design for our bodies. Christians are very tempted to compromise, "God accepts all forms of sexuality, whatever you want to do with your body, just be loving." God doesn't say that. God clearly teaches that he created sexuality to be enjoyed between one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage, and anything else is so much less than the goodness that he offers- and the thing is- that idea was just as controversial and close-minded and scoffed at 2000 years ago as it is today. Jesus and his teachings are always going to be countercultural. We're different, and that's okay. The truth of the Bible is different. That's okay! Because I haven't given you the most countercultural truth of the Bible yet. Every culture, every group, whether in Pergamum or Whitewater, shares this belief in common: Some people are good, some people are bad, and if you are good enough, good things will happen, and God or the gods will accept you. I hear this all the time: "It's not really about what you believe, but that you try your best." Jesus blasts this out of the water with the most counter-cultural truth of the Bible- no one is good. Everyone is a sinner. But Jesus was perfect and was tortured and shamed and executed for everything we've done wrong, and when we stand before the throne of God at the end of our lives, when we have so many sins on our account and God should cast us into Hell, he instead gives us a white stone. In the ancient world, juries in court would decide whether someone was guilty or innocent, and if they thought they were innocent, they would cast a white stone. In Christ, even though we aren't good, we are given a white stone by the only jury that matters- God himself. That means no matter what you've done, no matter who you are, you can be cherished and accepted by a holy God because it's not about what you've done, but what Jesus has done for you. That's counter-cultural in the most beautiful way, and because it's so good and so freeing, we can embrace everything Jesus says, even the hard things, because it comes from a good God. We can, and we must. Why?

2. God's Word keeps the Church alive. You may have noticed, but Jesus echoes this thought in his letters: he says, "To the one who is victorious, I will give..." Here, he's telling the Christians what he has in store for them, eternal life, the status of "innocent" and "perfect" before God, a new name that can only be known through faith in Jesus- it can't be earned, only given, but there's more. To the one who doesn't compromise Jesus' Word, who remains in the truth, Jesus will sustain them- just like he gave manna, miracle bread from Heaven to his people in the wilderness, Jesus will keep his church alive even where Satan has his throne. How- through his Word- through his Gospel- the good news that you are forgiven in Christ. Churches do not live on money or people in the pews, but on the life-giving, life-changing word of Jesus, and when churches compromise it, when they decide that they are too refined, too sophisticated, too reasonable for the clear words of Jesus, then they are going to die. It's common sense. Why are you all here? It's not because we have great coffee, or because parking is super simple and easy, you could be anywhere right now! There's something here you can get anywhere else: the unchanging, undying, life-giving truth of Jesus- if a church decides to abandon that, the only reason people would come is because of nostalgia, guilt, or so they feel like they are a good person- which culturally is becoming less and less the case. Do churches who remain faithful go through horribly difficult struggles and often look like they are losing and even close their doors? Yes! But know this: Jesus' Word is powerful, a two edge sword that pierces hearts and changes them. When it's preached in its truth and purity without compromise- Jesus works in powerful

ways. Trust Jesus, and listen to his Word, trust his Word. Let it challenge you. Let it change you. If Jesus is correct, you will find yourself challenged, convicted, changed, sustained, empowered, and overjoyed as you become closer and closer to Jesus.