

Written Copy: You Tolerate False gods and Prophets-Revelation 2:14-25

Mid-Week Lenten Service #3

Wednesday, March 18th, 2020

Text: Revelation 2:14-15, 20-25

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.

²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. ²² Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, ²³ and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. ²⁴ But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. ²⁵ Only hold fast what you have until I come.

Exegetical Statement

In Pergamum Christ compliments His Church for standing fast to Him in faith in the midst of the Satanic activity that was the center of pagan god worship. But He charges His Church with allowing some to involve themselves with the worship of other gods alongside of the worship of Jesus for the sake of financial and cultural peace. He calls them to repent before He returns on the Last Day and with the sword of God's Word that penetrates to the sin of the heart and with His burnished bronze feet stamps out the evil and cuts them off from their share of eternal life. Those who overcome this sin will receive Christ, the once hidden now manifest in the flesh manna and with the white stone of declared innocence will live with Him forever

In Thyatira Christ compliments His Church for their continued growth in good works and service to those in need. But they have allowed in their midst a false prophet (Jezebel) who teaches syncretism and is leading His faithful to tone down the exclusivity of the doctrine: faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. While He has been patient the time has come to increase affliction on them to move her and her followers to repent. Otherwise He will put an end to them and prove to the world He is the God who judges hearts and minds. But those who have not followed her are to remain steadfast in the one true faith until He returns and smashes like pottery all those who worship false gods and calls His faithful to rule with Him forever.

Focus Statement:

Christ is the loving Lord who uses the 2-edged sword of Scripture to move us to repent of our indulgence in the worship of society's gods and our tolerating syncretistic practices. He gave His life for us and will not let us go without a fight. He works through affliction to make us see there is only One God who can save us now and eternally

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

When we lose our first love for Jesus that opens the door to fear replacing faith in our lives. Then instead of standing strong against the temptations of culture to worship mammon we try to live in both worlds, Christians on Sunday and worldly during the week. We then tolerate teachers who hold that Christ is not the only way but we should "Coexist" because all roads lead to heaven

What the hearer should do as a result:

Repent of the ways in which we indulge in culture's sinful idolatry, separate ourselves from those who preach syncretism and hold fast to Christ even though it may make our lives on earth harder

Subject Sentence: Hold fast in faith to Christ alone as Savior/God

Tonight we will be making stops at Churches #3 and #4 on our journey through the 7 Churches of Revelation that the risen Christ told the Apostle John to write to. These will reveal the 3rd and 4th sins that only Christians can commit. These sins happen when you lose your first love, as Jesus told the Church in Ephesus, then let your fear rule over your faith, as He told the Church in Smyrna last week. Those lead to tonight's two sins: You tolerate other gods, and you tolerate false prophets.

Our first stop is in Pergamum, which is north of Smyrna on the trade route. It was famous for its love of reading, and had a library with over 200,000 books. Legend has it that when papyrus, the main source of paper for writing ran short, this city invented parchment as the substitute. It was also famous for its school of medicine along with the worship of the god of medicine and the god of the guild of doctors which was Asklepios. The idol of this false god became the symbol for healing, and is the inspiration for the Blue Cross Blue Shield logo today. Religion played an important role in Pergamum with the large variety of temples and altars that filled it. These included altars for Zeus: the ruling god of Greek pantheon, Athena: the goddess of war, wisdom, and courage, Dionysos: the god of wine, women, and song, as well as Asklepios: the god of medicine. Because of the emphasis on the worship of false gods in this city Jesus refers to it as the place where Satan's throne is. The temptation for Christians to turn away from faith in Christ would be great here. But Jesus commends them in **Revelation 2:13** **"¹³I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. 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."**

Despite one of their own being forced to die a martyr's death they have held fast to Jesus name, refusing to denounce Him as Lord.

But not everything is hunky dory in this Church. **Revelation 2:14** “**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.**” They have allowed “the teaching of Balaam to exist, and it has creating a block of stumbling, or another way to translate it: the teaching of Balaam is setting a trap that can cause those who believe in Christ to fall away. And what was the problem with Balaam? As you may recall from our Old Testament Lesson, he was a prophet for hire. He knew something about the religions of the Canaanites, as well as the LORD God whom the Israelite’s worshiped. And if you paid him enough, he would intercede on your behalf with the god of your choosing. The King of Moab and Midian sent for him and was ready to pay him extravagantly to put a curse of Israel, of whom he was deathly afraid. The LORD God, who is the only God who exists, comes to Balaam and warns him several times to speak only what the LORD tells him. It seems Balaam was struggling to obey the LORD while his desire for riches waged within him. So the LORD takes hold of Balaam’s mouth and refuses to allow him to utter anything but blessings over His people. Even so, Balaam’s greedy heart did find a way to earn his money from King Balak. He advised Balak to send the young temple prostitutes to lure the Israelite men into worshipping their false god. And it worked. These men didn’t renounce faith in the LORD God per se, but they did have so much fun worshipping and fornicating at the temple that one of them brought a temple prostitute back to camp, in broad daylight, in the sight of Moses and all the others. The LORD reacted in judgment by slaying 24,000 of the offending Israelites to purge this sin before they crossed over the Jordan to take possession of the Promised Land.

How is this teaching evident in the Church today? We live in the midst of a culture that regards any number of worldly things and pursuits to have “god-like” importance. Culture reveres sports stars, music stars, movie stars as something close to gods. They allow these people to have an authoritative voice in politics and religion, even though their vocation has nothing to do with these things. Not just people, but activities and personal pursuits can compete for the place that only Christ should have in your life. Consider your schedule this past month. What are the things that have taken precedent over the time you could’ve spent with Jesus in personal devotion and prayer? What prevents you from leading your family in devotional time with Jesus? What are the things that you allow to compete for your time on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings? Truthfully examine your life inside and outside Church Do you lead a double life? Are you one person with one set of friends on Sunday, and then a totally different person with a different set of friends, interests, and values Monday through Saturday? Perhaps you do consider Jesus to be number one, but there are several number twos close behind. He warns His disciples and His Church in **Matthew 6:24** **"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.** Whatever else is taking second place in your life won't be content to remain there forever. And Jesus will not share first place with anyone or anything.

For this reason Jesus opens this letter describing Himself as **Revelation 2:12** ¹² **"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.'** That sharp two edged sword symbolizes God's Word, **Hebrews 4:12** **For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing**

to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Jesus wields this Word not to slay you. But to cut the sin away from your heart. He uses it to remove those things that threaten to crowd Him out. He uses the Law found in His word, as well as the Law not preached: the natural consequences of our sinful behavior, in order to prove to us that life without Him doesn't work. And when He has purged our love of the world from us, He brings to bear the healing Gospel that points back to Him as the only one we will ever need. The one who died and rose again to be all you ever need.

The next stop on our tour is the city of Thyatira. It is located on the Lycus river between Pergamum and our next stop next Wednesday: the city of Sardis. Thyatira was unlike Pergamum in that the worship of Greek gods or even the Emperor was not what the city was known for. It was known for the purple dye that was manufactured there. It was an expensive dye used to make purple cloth. They sold the dye and the garments died purple for a large sum of money. The purple cloth and dying business were run by a group of trade guilds. In order to be a part of these you had to be a member. These guilds all had their own patron god that was worshiped to ensure wealth and success. As a Christian, trying to earn a living here, you had a choice to make: go along with the crowd, or find yourself with no work and no income.

Jesus addresses these Church saying in **Revelation 2:19** "**I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.** They were doing works of love and that demonstrated their faith, and these works

were growing in number. Perhaps they involved taking care of those ostracized by the trade guilds.

Revelation 2:20 But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. Who is this person called Jezebel?

It could be a real woman by that name. But we remember that Revelation is written in symbolic code. Jesus definitely wants us to think back to the infamous Old Testament Character of the same name. She was the foreign princess who married the Israelite King Ahab. She brought to Israel the worship of the Canaanite God Baal. At first Baal was just another god among many that the Israelites worshiped, including the LORD God. But soon she command Baal alone was to be worshiped, and she persecuted and killed the prophets of the LORD God. Worship of the LORD God went underground. And the LORD's prophet Elijah went into hiding. The LORD would not give up on His people without a fight. Baal was believed to be the god that brought the rain. So while His people, at Jezebel's leading, turned away from Him, He caused a severe drought to come upon the land. No matter how many sacrifices they made to Baal the rain did not come. And would not come until the LORD said it would. After allowing Israel to suffer three long years He ordered His prophet Elijah to arrange for a showdown on Mt. Carmel. There the LORD proved not only that He is the only God who answers with fire when called upon, He is the only God, the One True God, who brings the rain. And still, even though the all the people including King Ahab witnessed these mighty miracles, Jezebel was able to put a price on Elijah's head. She refused to believe what had been witnessed by the whole nation.

What is the message to the Church then and now? When we allow other gods to have a place in our hearts, we become blind to the prophets, messengers, and spokesmen that the devil sends into our midst. One of the ways we can see this today is when the Church focuses on growth in temporal wealth instead of spiritual wealth. When our focus becomes how many dollars are in the offering plate, and how many butts are in the pews, instead of the importance of each and every soul that we come into contact with finding a home in Jesus's kingdom; whether it be at this location, or another Church that rightly provides the Word and Sacrament. The voices of Jezebel are those that preach "Church Growth", where we need to do things differently to catch the attention of the younger generations. Now there is some truth to that. We can and should evaluate the way we present the Gospel, as long as that method of transmission communicates clearly and accurately Law and Gospel. But the voices of Jezebel often want us to preach a different Gospel: one called the Prosperity Gospel. In this case the Jezebel figure is one we call Joel Olsten. He fills huge arenas by preaching that Jesus came to earth to give you a good life, and an abundant life. You just need to claim the special gifts that He has for you. There is no talk of sin, or of Jesus suffering and death as the remedy for sin. You will never hear the Apostle Paul's life story of pain and suffering and danger and beatings, because that doesn't fit with Joel's Gospel message. But His message is not the message that Jesus Christ tells in **Matthew 16:24-26** ²⁴

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells us of God the Son who became one of us. How God Himself came to give the perfect sacrifice: a human body, mind, and soul, to die on the cross for you and I. He became the perfect sacrifice for you and me, who desire to hold fast to our life on the earth, so much so that we would forfeit our eternity if not for His work in our heart and soul. As He describes Himself in **Revelation 2:18** "**And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.**" He is the divine Son of God and His eyes pierce through the darkness that reigns in our hearts. He burns that darkness away, and with it the desire to worship our earthly life at the expense of our relationship with Him. Those feet of burnished bronze stamped out the power of sin when He suffered and died to remove the devil's power to claim us and control us. Then through the work of the Holy Spirit, He points us to the love that made Him hang on that cross for each of us. He points us to the victory that is His death and resurrection. And gives to us over and over again the gift of faith so that we hold fast His salvation work throughout our time on this earth.

He provides us with an additional word of comfort and hope. **Revelation 2:24-27** ²⁴ **But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden.** ²⁵ **Only hold fast what you have until I come.** ²⁶ **The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations,** ²⁷ **and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.** He tells us to hold fast to the truth of His Word that we have in the Scriptures and as expounded in our Lutheran Confessions. Hold fast and continue to preach and teach His Gospel even if the rest of what is called

Christianity turns away after the teaching of their own Jezebels. Hold fast until He comes, when we will stand and rule with Him in eternal life.

When we lose that first love we had for Jesus, the fear of all that is going on in the world takes its place. That fear can move us to chase after the things the world chases after. It can open our hearts to a message that is not the Gospel of Jesus but a message from Satan Himself. But the Son of God who wields the double-edged sword that is the Word of God, and has eyes like flames of fire, can cut through the darkness in our hearts, and cut away the sin that has taken up residence there. He moves us to repent when we make other things more important than He. He lovingly pulls them off the throne of our hearts and by faith ascends to His rightful place. He teaches us what it means to be His servants. He provides what we truly need to be those servants throughout our days of pilgrimage until we are called home to live with Him forever. Amen.

