

Letters to Seven City Churches: Letter to a Compromising Church

Revelation 2:12-17

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on May 25, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Probably the worst thing you can call someone today in our postmodern, pluralistic, secular age is *intolerant*. Call me an idiot, a fool, a jerk, a prick – and I can just shrug it off. But call me intolerant? No way. If I get labeled “intolerant”, that could really mess up my life. Intolerant people lose their jobs. Intolerant people are ostracized by friends and family. Intolerant people are not considered good neighbors or friendly colleagues. Intolerant people end up on the wrong side of history.
 - So no one wants to be called intolerant. We want to be called the opposite. We want to be known for our tolerance, for our open-mindedness. In our day and age, tolerance for differing and even opposing viewpoints is a virtue. For many it’s preeminent. It’s the highest of virtues.

- ❖ **That’s why for many people, in today’s passage, Jesus comes across as surprisingly intolerant.** *What’s going on here?* Why is Jesus, the model of love and acceptance, so passionately intolerant towards certain ideas, certain teachings – particularly that of Balaam and the Nicolaitans? To the point that he’s telling one of his churches that if you don’t put a stop to these teachings in your church, then I’m coming to make war (v16).
 - That sounds pretty intolerant. What happened to open-mindedness? Why can’t Jesus let these church members teach whatever they sincerely believe and just let other members decide for themselves? Why does he insist that these teachers stop what they’re doing or else he’s coming with a sharp two-edged sword?

- ❖ It seems a bit excessive and rather intolerant. **But the reason why Jesus speaks this way is because he understands that his Church is at war.** No, we’re *not* talking about a religious war against people of other religions. We’re *not* talking about jihad. No, the Church is at war – not against flesh and blood – but, as the Apostle Paul puts it, “*against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*” (Eph. 6:12)
 - **The Church is in a battle of allegiances.** Who rules us? Who’s our authority? Where does our allegiance lie? At the feet of Christ? Or at the feet of another?
 - In the battle of allegiances, every church in every generation will be faced with external pressures to conform to this world, to the pagan or secular society in which it resides. For the church in Pergamum, the question is: *Who do you ultimately serve? Rome? Its Emperor? Or Christ your Lord and King?*

- ❖ So there’s a battle of allegiances. But that’s not all. The Church is actually fighting a two-front war. Paul says elsewhere, “³*We are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.*” (2 Cor. 10:3-5)
 - **The Church is also in a battle of ideas**, of thoughts, of truth vs. error. So just as we constantly face external pressures to conform, the Church is constantly under internal pressures to compromise our convictions.

- ❖ It's a two-front war. We can't drop our guard on either side. The church in Pergamum is a classic example of a church that does just that. It's standing firm against external pressures (persecution, even martyrdom!). **But they only fought on one front in the war, and now they're on the verge of being undone by a careless tolerance of false ideas from within.**
 - *Want to know why Jesus is so passionately intolerant towards falsehood in the church?* Because he knows that false ideas enslave people to false promises and a false hope. **And the one thing you need to know Jesus is that he is passionately intolerant of people being enslaved (and potentially damned).**¹ He won't tolerate that at all. Especially when it's happening in his own church by false ideas being propagated in his own name. Apparently he'll go to war over that.

- ❖ So I don't think Jesus is going to apologize any time soon for his intolerant approach for dealing with false teaching in the church. He's not going to sit around and have a dialogue with false teachers. He's going to discipline them – that is, **he expects a faithful church to faithfully discipline those in their own ranks who are spreading falsehood.**
 - That's a basic overview of our passage. But let's get into so you can see for yourself. I'm going to follow a similar outline I used for the letter to the Ephesian church. **First**, we'll see what commendation Jesus has for them. **Second**, we'll consider his condemnation. And **third**, we'll see how Jesus challenges the church to respond.

Commending a City Church

- ❖ Let's see how Jesus commends this church. But before we do that, let's recall the context of what's going on. This book is a letter written by the Apostle John in 96AD containing a prophetic revelation. It was directed toward seven city churches in 1st-century Asia Minor. This was during the reign of Emperor Domitian where Christians experienced brief but intense periods of persecution. One such episode landed John in exile on the prison island of Patmos where he wrote this book.
 - So far in chapter two, John has passed on a message from Jesus to the angels of the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna. These angels function somehow as representatives of their respective churches. Now here in v12 we read, "*And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.*"

- ❖ For John's readers, Jesus holding a two-edged sword would've immediately brought to mind the image of an executioner holding a Roman broadsword. The early Christians were far too familiar with that scene. They witnessed the beheadings of beloved saints including Paul and Timothy (according to tradition). They've seen a two-edged sword do its damage.
 - So the question before them is: ***Whose sword do you fear?*** A Roman sword or Jesus' sword? You can avoid one but that will put you in danger of the other. So which sword do you fear more?

¹ Credit to Darrell Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey Through the Book of Revelation*, pg. 79.

- ❖ For the believers in Pergamum, they chose correctly. They chose Jesus, and he commends them for it. Look at v13, "*I 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.*"
- ❖ Again, there's a battle of allegiances being waged, and here Jesus is alluding to a certain degree of rule or authority that Satan has over this fallen world. He makes mention of Satan's throne and apparently it's in Pergamum. *Now why would Jesus describe the city like that?*
 - It's because, for the Roman province of Asia Minor, Pergamum was its capital city. It was the center of Roman rule in the region. And it boasted the reputation of being the first city in that region to build an imperial temple – a temple for the cult worship of Caesar (the first was dedicated to Augustus).
 - **So not only is it the capital city for the province, it's the capital city for imperial religion.** It's the Mecca of Caesar worship. It's the heart and center. If you recall, the Emperor Domitian was known to demand his subjects to call him their "Lord and God", and loyalty to him was demonstrated by offering a sacrifice before his image and confessing "Caesar is Lord".
- ❖ Now this imperial temple, along with many others, was situated on top of a large outcrop of rock – a throne of rock, in a sense. This is Satan's throne. The implication is that when you see the worship of Caesar in full force and the oppression of God's people for their refusal to bend the knee – it's a rather devilish scheme. It's ultimately Satan's doing.
 - But in spite of it all, the church was standing firm. Jesus commends them in v13 for holding fast to his name. They reserved the name "Lord and God" for Christ alone. That even led one of their own, a believer named Antipas, to be martyred.
- ❖ Granted, for churches like ours today, the external pressures we face are lesser in degree and intensity. We're not living under direct threat of martyrdom. But pressure is still pressure and the end is still the same. **You either hold fast and patiently endure as the pressure builds up or you release that pressure by conforming to the patterns of this world.**
- ❖ Friends, I can't think of a more pressing issue right now that places more external pressure upon the church to conform to the world than **the issue of same-sex marriage and the normalization of homosexuality.** Just think, a year ago today only nine states legally recognized same-sex marriage, and the federal government still defined marriage as the union of a man and a woman.
 - But in the span of twelve months, the Supreme Court has struck down the federal definition of marriage, and ten more states have legalized same-sex marriage (four by legislative action; six by judicial ruling). That's nineteen states. We can safely say that a clear majority of Americans live in a place where same-sex marriage is legal.²

² See online: <http://graphics.latimes.com/usmap-gay-marriage-chronology/>

- ❖ As well, federal judges in nine other states have very recently overturned statewide bans, but the rulings are in appeal. That would include Texas. Have no doubt, this is a live issue for us. It's a pressing issue for any church in our nation that seeks to hold fast to God's truth.
- ❖ Call me a pessimist (or perhaps in due time you'll call me a prophet) but I believe that, in short order, same-sex marriage will be legal from coast to coast. All these judicial appeals will work they way up to the Supreme Court, and in one decision they'll overturn every remaining statewide definition of marriage.
 - *If (when) that happens, what's a church to do?* Now the pressure from outside will be to conform. Ride the wave. Get on the bandwagon. You don't want to find yourself on the wrong side of history. So join this moral revolution. That's the easier choice – to relieve the pressure by conforming to the standards of the world.
- ❖ **But if we want to hold fast to Jesus' name – to keep our allegiance to Christ as Lord and God – then we have to hold fast to his truth as revealed in Scripture.** This is without a doubt the harder choice. This means we can't celebrate as good and pleasing what the Word of God calls sin. This means we can't tell people to pick up and embrace what the gospel tells them to put down and leave behind as they run to Christ for the redemption of their soul.
 - *Do you realize that souls are at stake?* If we truly love people, if we're truly compassionate disciples of Christ, then we can't budge on this. We can't conform ourselves to the patterns of this world.
- ❖ And I fully realize that the world will rain down condemnation on any person or church that won't conform, yet I fully believe that Jesus will pour out his commendation. This would be the case for any controversial issue that the Church faces. **In the end, you have to ask yourself: *Do I care more about standing on the right side of Jesus than on the wrong side of history?*** Whose sword do you fear? Do you fear God more than the criticism and condemnation of the culture-at-large?
- ❖ Friends, Jesus knows where you dwell. He knows how hard it is in our culture to hold to certain biblical truths. He can see the pressure you're under. And likewise he can see when you're faithful and holding fast your allegiance to his name. He commends those who stand *with* him on the side of truth.
 - **Keep in mind that standing with Jesus also means standing with *his* posture towards the opposition you face.** When Jesus was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten (1 Pet. 2:23).
 - Taking on his posture then means enduring vilification from those with whom you disagree while never vilifying in return. Taking insults while never insulting back. Responding to shouts and protests against you with tender truth spoken in tender love.
 - Stand firm in the truth with a posture of grace and love. For that, Jesus will commend you.

Condemning a City Church

- ❖ Now I realize that not everyone here would consider themselves a Christian, and not everyone would agree with the position I just took. That's why it's important to reaffirm that our battle is not against flesh and blood. Homosexuals or those advocating for homosexuality are not the enemy. The same could be said of adherents of other religions or atheists – of anyone who holds to a belief or practice that we'd disagree with. They're not the enemy.
 - In this sense, it is a tragedy when churches are intolerant. **Churches should be communities of truth-tellers, yet communities that still tolerate in their midst those with whom they (sharply) disagree.**
 - But there is a difference between tolerating that person in your church (welcoming him, loving him, serving him) and tolerating him to spread that wrong belief or practice among the flock (allowing false ideas to go unchecked).

- ❖ Being intolerant towards false teaching is what Jesus actually commends. And as was the case in Pergamum, he'll condemn churches that fails to display this kind of intolerance. Notice how Jesus says in v16 that the sharp two-edged sword is coming from his mouth. **In other words, the sharp sword is a metaphor for sharp words. Jesus has some cutting criticism for this church.** His word is going to lay bare some serious faults.
 - Let's read vv14-15, "*¹⁴But 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.¹⁵So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.*"

- ❖ What we have here in Pergamum is the opposite problem of that in Ephesus. If you recall, the Ephesian church was commended for holding fast to sound, biblical theology but condemned for its lack of love. **But it appears that, for the Pergamene church, a desire to love and accept has resulted in a careless tolerance of a group of theological compromisers who were wrecking havoc in the church.**
 - I think these people holding the teaching of Balaam (v14) and the teaching of the Nicolaitans (v15) are the same. In John's day, there was a heretical group known as the Nicolaitans, and apparently their teaching found an audience among some of the members in Pergamum. We don't know much about them besides what we find here in Revelation. But apparently their teaching resembled the teaching of Balaam, the prophet that appears in the OT book of Numbers (22:1-25:9; 31:1-20).

- ❖ Balaam was a prophet-for-hire and the Balak, the king of Moab, offered a pretty penny if Balaam would curse the Israelites. But the Lord stopped Balaam and instead told him to bless Israel. The king of Moab obviously was not pleased and didn't pay up.
 - So still wanting that paycheck, Balaam devised another scheme. If you can't beat them with a curse from without then find a way to compromise them from within. So he advised Balak to send Moabite women into Israel's camp to seduce the men into idolatry (worship of Baal) and sexual immorality (fornication).

- ❖ So Jesus is saying here in v14 that some in the church in Pergamum were promoting this same kind of teaching as they held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. **He means that these people were permitting (or even encouraging) fellow church members to participate, to some degree, in idolatrous practices and sexual immoral behavior.**
 - In those days, when someone sacrificed an animal to an effigy of Caesar (or their favorite god), a portion of that animal was burned as the sacrifice and a portion was given back to the worshipper with which he could throw a sacred feast in honor of that god. This happened all the time. So it wouldn't be odd for these Pergamene Christians (who once worshipped the same idols and threw the same feasts) to be invited by their pagan friends to these feasts. *Should they attend? Could they participate and still be faithful to Christ?* That was a real pressing issue.
 - And as we've said before, many of these pagan religions and festivities involved cult prostitution. These temples would house prostitutes that you would fornicate with as part of your worship to that god or goddess. If you think we live in a sexually-charged, sexually-explicit society, we don't compare to 1st-century Greco-Roman society.

- ❖ **Now just as Balaam was ultimately driven by money, perhaps those holding to Nicolaitan teaching were motivated by the fear of financial loss**, which was a real threat if believers refused to participate in the various festivities and the cult worship of Caesar. If you're not fulfilling social expectations or doing your patriotic duty, then you'll likely face persecution. You might lose business. You might lose your job or lose opportunities. You might be marginalized and maligned. You might even be martyred like Antipas.
 - So whereas the Ephesians hate the works of the Nicolaitans, the Pergamene believers have Nicolaitans in their church, and they tolerate them as members in good standing even though they're spreading this kind of teaching among the flock.

- ❖ Friends, we need to ask ourselves if there are any ideas circulating in churches like ours that we could compare to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. *Are there ideas that would advocate a way of thinking and living that minimizes sin, especially sexually immoral sin? Are there any ideas that permit or encourage a form of engagement with the larger culture that would push you to a point of compromise in your allegiance to Christ? Are there any ideas that would lead to a tacit approval of worshipping something or someone other than God alone?*

- ❖ **Where you have false ideas, idolatry and sexual immorality are always close behind.** Think about it. The root issue behind idolatry is the false idea that this thing or person is going to provide for me. And similarly, the root issue behind sexual immorality is the longing for true intimacy. The problem with false teaching is that it points you to the wrong answers.
 - **False ideas about what's going to provide for you and what's going to give you the intimacy you long for will inevitably lead you to idolatry and sexual immorality.** If you're inundated with these false ideas, you'll have no other out. It's like your trapped in a cycle of chasing idols and chasing sex. It's like you're enslaved.

Challenging a City Church

- ❖ And as I said earlier, that's why Jesus is so passionately intolerant towards false ideas – because they leave you enslaved to a false hope. Jesus is passionately intolerant of anyone being enslaved by the empty promises of idolatry and sexual immorality.
 - And that's why he issues a clear warning and challenge for each of his churches to deal decisively with these false ideas and those who are propagating them. Let's read v16 again, *“Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”*

- ❖ Now it's important to point out that the command here to repent is in the second person, singular tense. That means Jesus is not telling the false teachers to repent (though clearly they have to). Here he's specifically talking to the angel of the church in Pergamum who represents all the members. So the command to repent is really directed at the church.
 - The church needs to repent of its sin of turning a blind eye to false teaching being spread by their own members. **Churches need to discipline their own out of a motivation of wanting to keep Jesus from coming and making war against them.**
 - *Did you notice what Jesus said?* To the church he says repent and start disciplining these people or else I'll come to *you* soon and war against *them* – on those who hold these false teachings.

- ❖ It's unfortunate that, in our day, the biblically-mandated practice of church discipline has been largely ignored in the American church or it's been handled badly, so that now most Christians see church discipline as a purely negative thing. It's viewed as strictly punitive. It's about punishing the person. The whole thing feels judgmental, hypercritical, and downright unloving.
 - **But what we see here in v16 is that, to Jesus, church discipline is a process of love aimed at keeping from divine judgment those under that you put under discipline.** In other words, if we really love one another as fellow members of this church, then we'll confront any false ideas that promote idolatry or sexual immorality, and we'll lovingly rebuke fellow members if they're the ones spreading it.
 - **If you take Jesus' warning seriously and the image of him wielding a sharp two-edged broadsword seriously, then brotherly love would compel you to confront and correct fellow members who are in error.** For the love of God and the love of one another, you've got to be intolerant when false ideas have enslaved a fellow believer.

- ❖ Now I love how Jesus concludes his message to the church in Pergamum. He ends with a strong encouragement. Listen to v17, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.”*

- *Why is Jesus promising to give these believers hidden manna and a new name written on a white stone?* I believe these particular promises are meant to directly address the needs that people are seeking when they pursue idolatry and sexual immorality.

❖ **The manna signifies God's provision of our daily needs in contrast to what we seek from idols.** The reason we chase after money or relationships or status or power is because we have false hope that these earthly things will provide the satisfaction our souls desire.

- So when Jesus promises to feed us manna, he's saying that I've got all the provision you need. You don't need to chase after other gods. And the reason the manna is described as hidden is simply because the full satisfaction of our souls awaits a feast to come – the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9).
 - The manna to be served that day is hidden. You can't see it right now. You have to trust in God's promise that, if you are in Christ, a table has been prepared for you at the feast.

❖ *And what's up with this white stone with a new name written on it?* Some have theorized that it's referring to the ancient custom in athletic games of giving a white stone to victorious athletes as the ticket of admission to the celebratory feast. That would fit if the end-time marriage feast is in view.

- **But I think fundamentally the gift of a new name on a white stone is a promise of intimacy with God in contrast to what we're groping for in our lust after others.** We'll be given a new name that no one else will know besides the very One who names us. That private, exclusive knowledge of one other is the essence of intimacy.
 - Remember, we said that at the root of sexual immorality is the longing to experience true intimacy – to know and to be known with complete transparency and to still be loved. Well that's exactly what Jesus is promising in a relationship with him.

❖ Friends, if you have yet to experience the faithful provision and personal intimacy that's found in a relationship with the Lord, I invite you to receive his grace today, to repent of your own sins and to fly the cross of Christ to find forgiveness, new life, and admission to the great wedding feast of the Lamb.

- *Do you have ears to hear what the Spirit of Christ is speaking to his churches?* Stop chasing after idols with all their vain promises and fleeting pleasures. Feed your souls on the manna only Jesus can give and enjoy the intimacy of knowing him.