

## ***The Letter to Pergamum: Idolatry Is the Deadliest Sin<sup>1</sup>***

Second Sunday in Lent (YrB)

[Psalm 78:1, 19–20, 23–25, 32, 38; Numbers 22:1–20; Revelation 2:12–17; John 6:26–33]

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### **POINTS TO PONDER**

1. What is the main stumbling block – from the greater culture – for the church of Pergamum? Is this one that we currently face?
  2. Is the Nicolaitan heresy still alive and well? If so, how do we see it manifest?
  3. How is the two-edged sword mentioned by ‘Distomos’ applicable to 2 Timothy 4:1-2?
  4. What is the reply for those who say, ‘Shall we sin all the more so that grace can all the more abound’?
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**Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and King, Jesus the Christ. Amen.**

**Let us Pray:** Almighty God, You show to those who are in error the light of Your truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ’s body, that they may reject those things that are contrary to the faith. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

I know what you are wondering. What is a strange man dressed in a white robe and carrying a double-edged sword doing in this peace-loving church? Why is he in this pulpit? Might he be here to slay you as they did Brother Antipas, a man whose courage and faith continue to inspire so many?

No. I am not an agent of Caesar on a mission of death. I am an agent of the King, the Lord Jesus, who has sent me on a mission of life. I am your angel, the angel of this church. Distomos, “Two-Edged,” is my name. Let me remind you of the double-edged sword of Jesus, a sword that comforts and defends His people yet also judges and slays the unrepentant who cling to idols. I have come to you from John, the apostle of love, who is held prisoner on Patmos, a lonely island two hundred miles south of here. He sends you greetings and assurances of his prayers amid your trials, living as you do in this pagan and immoral city.

To your neighbors, religious pluralism is one of the highest virtues. They see no reason for an exclusive faith. In fact, because you refuse to acknowledge any god but the Holy Trinity and because you reject the countless other so-called deities worshiped in your community, your neighbors see you as a threat. You are considered intolerant, undesirable. You are labeled enemies of the state.

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<sup>1</sup> Worship & Sermon resources for this series: *Revelation for Lent*, Donald H. Neidigk, (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 2004)

What an insult you are to religious Pergamum – wealthy, educated, and sophisticated Pergamum. Your city once had a library of 200,000 volumes before the books were carted off to Egypt by Marc Antony. Parchment, the finest and most long-lasting writing surface, was invented here.

On the hill against which Pergamum is built are hundreds of temples dedicated to every god imaginable. A colossal altar to Zeus, chief of all the Greek gods, is carved from the mountain's solid rock. There are temples to Athena, Dionysus, and even Asclepius, the god of medicine. Of course, no truly Roman city would be complete without temples to the divine Augustus and the goddess Rome, focuses of the imperial cult. There is even a monument to "the unknown god," should one perhaps have been left out.

As religious as your neighbors clearly are, they find it deeply offensive that you do not join them in their festivals or invite them to yours. They consider your doctrine that only baptized believers in Christ have a home in His kingdom and a place at His table to be rude. They consider you to be judgmental and intolerant because you do not participate in the immoral rites of the numerous pagan temples. You do not associate with them, which makes your neighbors angry.

But your neighbors are more than angry. They are enraged to the point of murder as they oppose all for which you stand. That is why John sent me to you to speak these words of Jesus: **"I know where you dwell – where Satan's throne is."**<sup>2</sup> With every god but Christ exalted in Pergamum, it is no wonder that your suffering has intensified, as it has for your brethren in sister congregations.

Many of you watched helplessly as Brother Antipas was put to death because he refused to recognize all the gods as being equally divine with Jesus. Although his martyrdom terrified you beyond words, you remain faithful.

But you have a more subtle enemy, one not from outside the congregation at Pergamum but from within the church. Some claim you can be faithful to Christ while adopting the values and way of life practiced by the pagans. Such individuals are among you, and so far, you have tolerated them. So, our Lord Jesus says, **"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."**<sup>3</sup>

You remember the story of Balaam, don't you? He was hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Israelites who were on their way from the desert to the Promised Land. No one had been able to stop them. The Amorites had fallen before them, and Moab was next in line. "I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me," King Balak had pleaded with Balaam, a renowned pagan prophet.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Revelation 2:13

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 2:14

<sup>4</sup> cf. Numbers 22 ff.

But no matter how hard he tried; Balaam could not curse the Israelites. All he could utter was blessing upon blessing for Israel, so he tried another tactic. Balaam would get the Israelites to make spiritual and moral compromises. If he could coax the Israelite men into the tents of the Moabite women, Israel's threat would be neutralized. It almost worked. The Bible says, **"The [Israelite] men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods."**<sup>5</sup> The result was a plague on Israel that did not end until the leaders of this apostasy were put to death.

Balaam has been dead for centuries, but his spirit lives on in people such as the Nicolaitans. These followers of Nicolas advocate spiritual and moral compromise in the church at Pergamum and in many other congregations. Believe in Jesus, Nicolas says, but join the party too. What could be wrong with a meal at the temple of Zeus or Athena if it promotes civic unity? Why not join in the fun with the temple prostitutes? In fact, why not do whatever you please? After all, our God is a God of grace. He forgives us in advance.

Good Christians of Pergamum turn a deaf ear to these poisonous words. They are nothing more than the lies of Satan. Have you not heard the words of St. Paul, who, like Antipas, died for the faith? **"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."**<sup>6</sup>

Dying to sin and living to righteousness – this is the calling of those baptized into Jesus. Enabled by the Holy Spirit through the Word of Christ. They say no to Balaam and his lies. They say no to the easy, compromising religion of Nicolas. They say yes to the faith of Antipas, who followed Jesus even to the point of death.

Ultimately, this double-edged sword of Jesus is no threat to the faithful Christian, though Christians, like all people, need to repent. The sword has two edges for a reason. One edge is for judgment. It proclaims the wrath of God to all who will not repent of sin and seek His mercy. This is the edge reserved for Balaam and Nicolas and their followers, for those who choose idolatry and immorality and spurn God's offer of grace and forgiveness in Jesus. It is the sharpened edge of God's Law that, when violated, earns His retribution.

The other edge of the sword of Christ defends the humble sinner who comes to God for mercy. This edge slays every enemy of the soul: sin, death, and the devil. This edge eternally protects all who hide behind it. It is the comforting edge of the Gospel, which never cuts but always heals and saves. May you find yourself behind the Gospel edge. Jesus pleads with you: **"Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of My mouth."**<sup>7</sup> There is one sword and two edges: One to fight for you, and one to fight against you. Which will it be?

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<sup>5</sup> cf. Numbers 25:1-2

<sup>6</sup> Romans 6:1-4

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 2:16

Jesus and His servant John have confidence that you will choose the Gospel edge. Why? Because you are standing firm in faith. **“Yet you hold fast My name, and you did not deny your faith in Me, even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”**<sup>8</sup>

Well done! Continue to stand firm! As you do, there is a promise to you from the Holy Spirit: **“To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna ...”**<sup>9</sup> This manna is God’s gift to all for whom Jesus has died and who have been baptized in Him. In the desert, God’s people were fed and sustained by a food that miraculously appeared each day. For all the years of their wanderings, manna was always available. But once in the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, manna was no longer needed, and it disappeared.

So, it is for you who live in a hostile city surrounded by the enemies of Jesus. Heavenly food graces your table each time you celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Jesus is present, miraculously strengthening you, sustaining you, and defending you. But one day the Holy Meal of His body and blood will no longer be necessary because you will see your Lord face-to-face and join Him at the eternal feast in heaven.

How can you be sure of this future reality? Because of the white stone of innocence. **“To the one who conquers, [Jesus says,] I will [also] give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone ...”**<sup>10</sup> All the acquitted, all those who are declared not guilty, possess this white stone.

The divine Judge has heard the charges against you. He has seen the wounded body of Jesus, His arms outstretched, pleading for you. He has seen the garments of Christ’s righteousness covering you in Baptism. The decision has been reached.

Almighty God has taken out the two stones – the black one for guilt and the white one for innocence. By His grace in Christ Jesus, the white stone of acquittal has been given to you. On it is inscribed your new name, a name that declares you to be a child of God, a forgiven sinner, one who is righteous by faith.

Well, beloved, this completes my assignment for today. Although my name means “two-edged” and my words have been sharp, remember that I am the angel of your church. You may not see me, but you can be sure I will be here. Amen.

**“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”**<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Revelation 2:13

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 2:17

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 2:17

<sup>11</sup> Romans 15:13