

## **Revelation 2:12-17, The Wrong Throne**

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### **Introduction**

This series on the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 will complete our 2016 theme on how the Bible describes the problems that appear in churches, and their solutions. Our church does not relate much with the problems in Pergamum, at least on the surface. First, none of our members are killed for practicing the faith. Second, our teachers and preachers do not bring false doctrine. We remain a gospel-oriented, Bible-believing, Christ-worshiping church.

At a deeper level, one problem that besets many churches in our society including ours is that we do not know how to discern the present time, and our visions of the future all have silver linings: We expect that things will get easier, more convenient, more abundant, more fun for Christians and their churches. If that future does not arrive, we play the blame game: our worship is not exciting enough, our programs are not amusing enough, we need to be more exciting and more amusing. Christians in our culture have not yet come to grips with the reality described in the New Testament, that the world is by nature hostile to the church. Because we don't get that, we are both shocked and in denial by what is going in our country.

So the "we" this morning is the evangelical church in the USA. I think that there is a connection in this text that describes us as a whole. This morning is about Elgin Covenant insofar as, when the shoe of American Evangelicalism fits, we need to wear it; we cannot pretend it does not fit. At the same time this is not a personal scolding. Besides, we also share in the promise and hope that describe American evangelicals.

This is our connection to the text: Like the Christians in Pergamum, we want to avoid persecution. In Pergamum teachers of false doctrine had come in among them, trying to get them to compromise their faith as a way to avoid being persecuted. They were heard because the Christians had been hurt by persecution already and it was painful. We, however, fear the unknown: because we have not had to risk our lives, the prospect of being Christians in a hostile world has us frightened. We want answers that will help us avoid suffering. Fear causes ears to itch for new teachings that do not come from God.

**Let us pray:** Father God, give us grace to discern the truth, to live into your will in this present time, and to remain faithful to you in every time. In Jesus' name, amen.

### **1. Discerning the Present**

Jesus warns the believers in Pergamum that, as persecution has happened in their recent past, it will happen again. Christians in Elgin do not have persecution to death in our past, nor do the great majority of churches in America. Instead evangelical churches remember good old days when more people came, and that memory has some of us wishing we could turn the clock backwards, to recover a past with values that had once been guided by a public acknowledgment of God. If only we recovered those values, perhaps by electing the right people, or perhaps by praying for a revival, then, we think, laws will be repealed or voided or rewritten and things will go back to "normal," back to a time when it was easier to be a Christian in the United States.

However, none of the right people are running for this nation's highest office. Furthermore, revival does not come to change laws and make lives easier, but instead to make lives holy and fit for eternity. When the Church calls itself back to being a people set apart from the world, and then, Christians extend that invitation to the lost, revival might come, and only

then will a holy people bring a leavening of righteousness to society. But legalism is to holiness what a wet match is to a bolt of lightning.

It is true that on some things we have tried to set ourselves apart from the world's values and remain holy. Many churches have drawn a line and insist on remaining faithful to God's revealed plan for marriage and family. Yet on other issues we are deeply compromised and have been historically. One example that should be obvious to all is that Christians throughout our country have been serving two masters, and it did not take long for Mammon, worldly wealth, to win out over Christ and his holiness.

To see that this is true just look at our own household giving patterns. The tithe, that is, ten percent of gross annual income, is to be devoted to the House of God. Mainline Protestant church members average one percent, evangelicals average two percent, and the Evangelical Covenant's members average four percent. Even evangelicals, the people who supposedly know our Bibles, lack the will to put our money into the service of our faith even by the minimum Old Testament standard. The New Testament standard is our whole lives and everything we have.

How is Elgin Covenant meeting that standard? I do not know. We are not the kind of church where the pastor gets family income information and superintends over private family decisions. So I do not know. But each of you know, for yourselves, whether what we have described is true of you.

Yet we evangelicals have gotten bees in our bonnets: *What's happening to our country? Why is the church shrinking? Why are children's soccer games scheduled for Sunday morning?* Let us ask a different question: What model are we living by, what Bible are we reading, that we should have expected anything different from what is happening now? When it was easy to be a Christian in the US, a vast majority of Christians weren't making the sacrifices. We served two

masters, and Mammon won our hearts. Now we must live in the consequences of our compromises, we must sleep in the bed we made. More on that next week.

## **2. Nicolaus and Balaam**

The Christians in Pergamum had never known a time that it was easy to be a Christian, and were tempted to compromise faith by serving a second master. After the death of Antipas the leadership was filled by people teaching new beliefs to keep Christians safe from persecution. Jesus exhorts them to persevere in the witness of Antipas for the sake of glory, and refers to the doctrine of compromise as the teaching of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans. Balaam was an Old Testament character. His error was that, for the sake of money, a person could compromise with idols. Many scholars see that this text connects the Nicolaitans to the error of Balaam, so that they taught what Balaam had taught.

Opportunities to compromise with idols were everywhere. Pergamum's Temple of Zeus may be what Jesus calls the dwelling place of Satan. Zeus was the chief of the Pagan gods in the pantheon of Greece and Rome; customs and rituals devoted to these deities filled the civic and religious life of Roman subjects. But Pergamum was also devoted to Roman patriotism and was a center of emperor worship. When Jesus states that Satan dwelt in Pergamum he refers to the civic, public life a city that persecuted Christians.

These teachers found a hearing because it is hard to live in Satan's shadow. The name Nicolaus, in Greek, might mean "Conqueror of the People" or "Victory for the People." In Revelation's practice of disguising its references, the teaching of the Nicolaitans might have been that it was okay to compromise with the emperor cult. Scholars agree that this was real for the believers in Pergamum. As Christians in Pergamum met in private homes, they would see around them the temples to Zeus and the Emperor. Certainly compromise and conformity to such

awesome, visible power was okay: Why not honor the public's religion and values, and in private follow Jesus for eternal life? So then, when a Christian blacksmith attends a guild feast where meat is offered in prayer to the god Vulcan, and libations are poured out to the god Bacchus, what is the right thing to do? Go along for job security? Not go along, and risk losing the license to work? The Balaam-types, probably the Nicolaitans, said go along with it. We might understand their teaching in this way: Jesus saves the soul for heaven, but in this life money makes the world go around, so do what you gotta do.

Jesus turns this attitude of compromise on its head by speaking in the absolute terms of divine judgment: To worship idols and make government a god, is to sell one's soul to Satan. We are without excuse when we serve two masters. We cannot compromise with the world's values and expect to remain in God.

### **3. Real Victory**

Compromise is explained away as a win-win for all concerned, but compromise on faith is never a win-win. The only real victory comes through Christians living our lives in faith as a people in the world but set apart from it. As Jesus begins to speak his promises in verse 17 he uses a word for being victorious: the believer "overcomes." In English we miss the play on words. "Overcomes" is built off the same root as the word Nicolaitan. We are to be an overcoming people, not a people who are overcome. When the church compromises its faith, the church might avoid pain for a short time but only for worse suffering, this time in judgment.

My college in Chicago, North Park, had a terrible football team, the Vikings. To get the point of this story, you have to realize that the North Park Vikings of 25 years ago stand in for the bad guys, the image of Satan. One day I went in the company of my two brothers to watch them play a much better team, Milliken, down in Decatur. Now on the surface of things two

football teams playing against each other will look evenly matched. They each have the same equipment and the same number of guys playing the same positions. Football teams are mirrors of each other. Between North Park and Milliken that was where the similarity ended.

At this game North Park was the first with the ball. The quarterback tricked the defense with the appearance that he was dropping back to throw, but he pivoted and took off straight down the middle for a touchdown. North Park 7, Milliken zero. Now many of you have heard me say that at North Park I was one of the most obnoxious of all sports fans. I was loyal to my teams, and dished on the opponents. This was okay normally when I was cheering for North Park, but not so okay on Sundays when I was in the t.v. lounge cheering for Green Bay and against the Bears. I was, shall we say, expressive in my joy over this touchdown, reminding everyone around me, in Milliken's own stadium, that we had seven points, and they had none.

Until Milliken scored on their next possession. Now a Milliken fan pointed at me and recited back the dance and cheer that I had done before. So I said to him, "What's the big deal? My team scored on Milliken, but your team only scored on North Park." You see, Milliken outclassed North Park at every phase of the game, their defense was never tricked on that play again, and they won by five or six touchdowns.

The Devil is tricky and might score against our defense once in a while, but this game was over before the kick-off. God's team has all the talent and skill. There might be a moment when the Devil is running rampant and gets a score, but we should no more panic or despair than Milliken did. God is the winning side, and the final score is not close, is not in doubt. If we suffer for a time, what is that compared to the Devil's final defeat? The dumbest thing anyone can do is panic, and change teams and start throwing blocks for the Devil, thinking that this will save us.

Only for a moment might we feel a little bit of relief. But then we come to the reckoning, and we find out that we betrayed God's team for a loser who is losing badly.

How much more is in store for us than the thrill of winning a football game? We will be admitted into eternal life with the white stones of our vindication, and we will share in the bread of life forever.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus taught that no one can serve two masters. Serving God and Money, too many of us tried to play both sides of the game. Now we are finding, as the world changes its mind about many things, that our compromises with Money have cost us our credibility in the world and the moral and spiritual capital that comes with it. It will be harder now to realign ourselves to faithfulness, to be a holy people. It is more difficult for Christians to camouflage ourselves in the world as the world's values depart further away from God's vision. Maybe that will finally be what the world notices that Christians aren't just like everybody else. But we have to persevere, we must not panic. We cannot line up on God's team and then start throwing blocks for the Devil. Yes he has busted loose and scored, but we are suited up for the winning team in a long game with an outcome that has long since been decided.

I don't know what forms that coming persecution may take in our context, or how much it will hurt, or how much pressure we will feel. But we are not finished exploring this topic as a church. In our adult Sunday School over the several weeks we are at looking this book, published by Moody, "Prepare: Living Your Faith in an Increasingly Hostile Culture." This will help us engage some things practically. We prepare first with the attitude we learn from Jesus: Expect suffering for his sake to happen. That was his message throughout the gospels, that is his

message to the churches in Revelation. The shock and denial of America's evangelicals are really not appropriate responses.

As we take Jesus at his word that the world is hostile to the Christian faith, then the Devil loses the element of surprise. As new laws appear regarding our tax exemptions, regarding the definition of Biblical morals as the crime of hate speech, regarding definitions of equal access and accessibility and indemnity, or as bullet holes appear in our signs and posts, as Christians get bullied on social media and are presented as pariahs on the news, these things will not shock us. Assume hostility, so that when it comes we do not engage the subconscious mechanisms that surface when we are surprised: the urge to fight, or to flee, or to curl up in a ball and freeze. Not one of those is a spiritual response. No, expecting hostility in whatever form it comes, we are prepared to meet it, in advance, with humility. Not compromise, but a humility that comes from our abiding peace with God: humility which shows the world that we are a holy people.

It is not so easy anymore to be a Christian in the US. Let us therefore show the world what it really means to live for Jesus and to look forward to eternal life. Amen.