

Good Church, Bad Church (Part 2) – Rev 2:12-17

Rev 2:12-17. We just started a little mini-series in our study of the book of Revelation, based on 7 messages from Jesus to seven 1st century churches. Some of whom were good, some bad, and some both. Good church, bad church.

And the messages apply to us just as much as them. Because Jesus said – *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches* (17a). So we do.

➤ And last week, we found that . . .
A good church patiently endures (v2a, 3)
A good church is high on truth (v2b, 6)
A bad church is low on love (v4-5)

Love for one another. And . . .

A good church is faithful to the end (v7b-11)

Faithful to Jesus and his word. A theme we're going to see repeated over and over in chapters 2-3. Starting in v12 with two *more* good church, bad church characteristics.

➤ Jesus is still speaking, and says, “*And to the angel of the church in Pergamum* (**Map**) [the angel being the pastor, *representing* the church; and Pergamum, a city located north of Ephesus and Smyrna] *write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.* (ESV) As in the power and authority to judge. Symbolized in 1:16 as coming out of his mouth. Describing the fact that Jesus can't and won't be stopped. Not by the *political* powers in Pergamum, capital of the province that it was; and not by the *spiritual* powers in Pergamum. Which were significant. V13.

[13] “*I know where you dwell* [Jesus says], *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.*

The first characteristic he addresses and commends, is devotion.

A good church is devoted to Jesus (v13)

You say, “Come on pastor. Isn't that Sunday School 101?” Well, you'd think. But he commends it straight up. *You hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith* (13). You're devoted to me. Loyal. Committed. Dedicated. That's a *good* church. It's devoted to Jesus.

In at least 3 ways from this verse. First . . .

By identifying with him. A good church is devoted to Jesus by *identifying* with him. Holding fast his *name*. We don't distance ourselves from him, just because the crowd does. We don't change our tune when we change buildings. We're not *sheepish* about associating with him and loving him. Is that true of you? Because if it's not, it won't be true of us.

Second, a good church is devoted to Jesus . . .

By believing in him. They don't deny his *faith*. *You did not deny my faith* Jesus said (13). The faith he delivered, the faith he demonstrated, and the faith he requires. Faith in who he is, what he says, and what he's done. A *good* church continues in a present state of belief and trust.

And third, a good church is devoted to Jesus . . .

By treasuring him. Holding *fast* his name. Because they value him above all else and all others. A good church is devoted; devoted to Jesus.

• Even in the face of **opposition**

Like the church in Pergamum, who lived where *Satan* lived, Jesus said. Where Satan's *throne* was. V13 – “*I know where you dwell* [Jesus says], *where Satan's throne is . . . where Satan dwells.*

Pergamum was not only the *political* seat of power, but the *religious*. Because the 4 most important *cults* of the day were based there. With temples to Zeus, Athene, Dionysos, and Asklepios. Not only that, but it was the official center of *emperor* worship in Asia Minor. With a temple to Augustus and a temple to Trajan. It was quite the concentration.

And one of the biggest reasons for it, was its elevation. **Pergamum** sat on a cone shaped hill a thousand feet above the surrounding valley. With large stone terraces leading to a massive altar to Zeus near its peak. All of which made it appear like a giant *throne* as you approached it from the south.

But the most disturbing aspect of Pergamum's religiosity, and the one that most likely led to the designation as the dwelling place of Satan, was the worship of the pagan god **Asklepios**. Because the *symbol* of Asklepios, was a snake wrapped around a pole. Called the *Rod* of Asklepios. Depicted in this statue.

And apparently, the religion had real power. Hello. People would come from all over the world to be *healed* in the temple of Asklepios. In fact, he was thought of as the *savior* of the world. And some of the most prominent *doctors* of the day resided there.

Which is why dozens and dozens of health organizations around the world use the Rod of Asklepios as their *logo*. Including the **World Health Organization**. That's the Rod of Asklepios. A pole with a snake around it. Troubling, isn't it?

I'm not saying the WHO is Satan incarnate, I just question the wisdom of giving credence to something that Jesus himself associated with Satan. And wonder if it opens the door to his influence. *****

Whatever the case, the church in Pergamum lived in the shadow of all that, and remained devoted. Even in the face of *satanic* opposition.

But that wasn't it. They were also devoted to Jesus . . .

• Even in the face of **death**

V13b – *You did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you.* We don't know much about Antipas, except for a legend that arose several centuries later, claiming he was slowly roasted to death in a bronze bowl during the reign of Domitian. Whatever the case, Antipas was a martyr.

And many martyrs followed. Faithful witnesses in their *own* respect. Like a group of Christian stonecutters under Diocletian in the 3rd century. Who refused to even carve an *image* of Asklepios. Makes me think of the bakers and photographers and florists in *our* day, unwilling to participate in same sex weddings. They're not dying for it. But people in other parts of the world are.

Like the leader of the church in Eritrea; East Africa. Who just died after spending 15 years in prison. 94 years old. And it's not uncommon. In fact, there were more martyrs for Christ in the last *century*, than all of history combined. Talk about devoted. Talk about good *churches*.

How can that be? How can we be so committed even in the face of death? Because we know who holds our *future*. We know who *really* sits on the throne. We know who wins. We know who the *real* healer is. They may *kill the body* Jesus said, but they can't kill our soul. (Mt 10:28)

May *we* be so devoted. In death *and* life. And may Jesus say the same of us that he said of Pergamum. *You hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith.*

➤ On the other hand, may he *not* say v14-15! You hold fast . . .

[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. [16] Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

Talk about good church, bad church. The Pergamum church was *good* in their devotion to Jesus, but *bad* in their allowance for sin.

A bad church accommodates sin (v14-16)

Not that every single *person* engages in sin, but that they allow for it in others. They turn a blind eye to it. V14 says *you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam*. And v15, *you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans*. Only *some* were actively sinning.

But Jesus tells them *all* to repent. V16 – *Therefore repent*. Everyone. That's the implication. Because he *narrows* the scope in the very next sentence. *If not* [if you don't repent], *I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth*. Them, referring to those who were actively sinning. Accommodated by the rest, who passively ignored it. And therefore need to repent as well.

It's a classic example of a few bad apples spoiling the whole bunch. Every person in a church doesn't have to live in sin for a church to be bad. Just a few, who are *tolerated* by the rest. Accommodated by the rest. Neither preaching against it *corporately*, nor addressing it personally.

And the sin that Jesus identifies, is just as pertinent today as it was then.

- **The sin of false teaching**

A bad church accommodates the sin of false teaching. *I have a few things against you* [Jesus says in v14]: *you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam* . . . [and v15] *you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans*. Probably two different false teachings, because Jesus says in v14 – *I have a few things against you*.

The point being, instead of *testing* what was said, like the Ephesian church, they ignored it. Instead of hating it, they embraced it. Instead of rejecting it, they allowed it; accommodated it. Probably by their silence.

It would be like somebody in a Small Group who says that we ought to affirm transgenderism, and isn't opposed by anybody; just crickets. Or that sex outside of marriage is okay as long as they're committed to each other. Failure to refute false teaching is a passive form of accommodation. Sin, in and of itself according to Jesus.

➤ The question is, what was the *teaching of Balaam* in v14? Why the big deal? Well, it comes from an incident in Numbers 25, when the Israelites were about to enter The Promised Land. (**Map 4, ESV Study Bible**) Balaam was a pagan prophet, who was summoned by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Israelites. Because the Israelites were encamped near them, ready to cross the Jordan, and the Moabites felt threatened.

And though Balaam was thwarted in his effort, because of his donkey, it didn't keep him from subverting things by telling the Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men, and influence them to engage in false worship. And sure enough, **Nu 25:1-3** says:

[1] While Israel lived in Shittim [near Moab], the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. [2] These [these women] invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. [3] So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor [the Moabite god]. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.

In other words, *a stumbling block* was put before the sons of Israel. Rev 2:14.

And 6 chapters later, in **Num 31:16**, we find out why.

Behold [Moses said], *these* [these Moabite women], *on Balaam's advice* [the teaching of Balaam], *caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.*

A plague that killed 24,000. (Num 25:9)

So the teaching of Balaam, was that it's okay to engage in adultery and fornication. It's okay to be unequally yoked. It's okay to cultivate intimate relationships with people who live and believe things contrary to God.

➤ No wonder Jesus had something against the church in Pergamum. They were *allowing* such teaching; and the behavior that followed. Playing the field religiously *and* sexually. Engaging in false worship and sinful acts, while professing Jesus as Lord. No biggie.

You know what that's called in our day? *Missionary* dating. Dating an unbeliever, often times living with them; thinking you can convert them while indulging in things contrary to God's Word. It's the teaching of Balaam. And to the extent we ignore it, or condone it; we accommodate it. Just like they did in Pergamum.

May we speak the truth in love, and hold the world at bay. Because Jesus holds us responsible for both.

And if we fail . . .

- **The solution is to repent**

Therefore repent, Jesus says in v16. Confess it and turn from it. Disavow it. Whether it's accommodating sin, engaging in it, or both.

If we don't, judgment is coming. *I will come to you soon* [Jesus said] *and war against them with the sword of my mouth* (16). A declaration of punishment. Every bit as certain and devastating as a *real* sword.

No wonder Jesus said in v17 – *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. Repent if you need to. Ask forgiveness and act accordingly. Let there be no reason for Jesus to say, *I have a few things against you*. (14)

➤ And why wouldn't we? Why *wouldn't* we listen and repent? It's not only the way to be right with God, but it's the only way to *conquer* and be rewarded. V17b – *To the one who conquers* [the one who *overcomes* sin and temptation; the one who doesn't *stop* believing and following] *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.* '

The solution to sin is repentance, and repentance leads to rewards. 3 of them.
3 Rewards (v17) for getting right, holding fast, and not accommodating sin.

1. Spiritual sustenance. If we remain devoted to Jesus, if we conquer, we stand to receive *hidden manna* it says (17b). As in spiritual sustenance. The bread of life, hidden in Christ, nourishing our souls. Every single day. Just like the daily manna God gave the Israelites. For them, it was physical sustenance, for us it's spiritual. For them it was temporary, for us it's eternal. If we hold fast and conquer.

2. Favored status

That's the idea of a *white stone* in v17. *To the one who conquers . . . I will give him a white stone*. Victors at sporting events or gladiator contests in that day, were often given a white stone, indicating their favored status to participate in the victory banquet.

Here, it's symbolic of our favored status to take part in the *ultimate* victory banquet; *the marriage supper of the Lamb*; Rev 19:9. The victory celebration when Jesus returns, and strikes down the nations; those opposed to him. It's a reward for our perseverance.

3. A new nature

To the one who conquers [Jesus said] . . . *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*. A person's name in those days conveyed their essence; their nature. Like the name of Jesus conveys his.

So to receive a *new* name, means we get a new *nature*. Like it says in 1 Cor 15. At the coming of Christ *we shall all be changed* (51). From sinful to holy. Mortal to immortal. Perishable to imperishable. A new nature, known only to those who receive it.

3 rewards, if we don't accommodate sin, and remain devoted to Jesus. Even in the face of opposition and death. Whatever you do, hold fast.

Prayer – Lord, forgive us of being ashamed of you. Forgive us for shrinking back in the face of opposition. Purify our hearts and heighten our awareness of the sin that so easily entangles. We want to be a *good* church; clear and firm in our *belief*, and worthy of your commendation.

You Are Loved