



The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.
Revelation 2:12-17

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English Standard Version

“The Church of Indiscriminate Tolerance”

This is the 7th sermon in the series on The Book of Revelation entitled,
“The King’s Triumphant Return.”

Revelation 2:12-17

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of Him who has the sharp two-edged sword. ¹³ ‘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. 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. ¹⁷ 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.’ ”

*Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us Your Word and making us Your people. As we look at the church in Pergamum, will You please help us? We know we’re **too** much like this church. We **don’t** trust Your Word as we should. We struggle with the same sins, the same temptations, the same idols, the same issues, the same problems. We **lack** faith. We’re sinful and self-centered. God, we know that soft words produce hard people and hard words produce soft people ... and these are **hard words**. We want to be people who are soft and kind and loving with each other ... so bring the hard words to us now. So Lord, help us to meet Jesus in His glory as we see Him here in these words. Do this for each of us, this morning, in Jesus’ good*

name, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *Distracted*¹

“Both (pilots) stated there was a distraction in the cockpit,” reported Alan Levin in an October 27th USA Today article. What was the distraction? They said they were on their laptops trying to figure out their upcoming flight schedules.

Most Americans who fly regularly have been interested in this story for, well, let’s say for reasons related to their own lives and the lives of their loved ones. And because we still freeze when we hear about plane crashes killing hundreds of people.

Learning that repeated calls from air traffic controllers to the cockpit of an Airbus A320 operated by a reputable airline, and flying at 450 miles per hour, tends to grab your attention. It also leaves you feeling very vulnerable. But now, at least in this case, we know the whole story.

Well, the answer doesn’t exactly put us at ease. Planes just don’t keep flying past Minneapolis when they’re supposed to land there. Pilots don’t just ignore radio contact from air traffic controllers.

Here is the truth, finally. According to the story entitled, “*Distraction led pilots to fly too far*,” the whole thing was about **distraction**. The distraction led the authorities to describe the situation by saying “there was a concentrated period of discussion where they didn’t monitor the airplane or calls from (controllers).” **I hate it** when that happens on giant tubes of steel hurtling through the skies at 37,000 feet, don’t you?

Well, here’s the scoop: this was a long flight from San Diego to Minneapolis. There was an argument between the pilot and the co-pilot. If you want to look deeper, there’s a corporate merger providing an intriguing background for the whole near-catastrophic affair, if you like that sort of thing in your mysteries. And then, and this is the real culprit that came out of the pilots’ confession, there was this really nifty, new computer program that caused them to become “engrossed” in their laptops.

We expect that from 13-year-old boys with their Gameboys, but not from professionals with 31,000 hours of combined flying time. And it’s only when a flight attendant called on the intercom that these experienced professionals realized they’d missed their destination and were headed for, well, maybe a really cool view of Lambert Field: really cool except that a few hundred folks trusted their lives to go to the Mall of America instead.

Due to other problems that likely need fixing too, we just don’t have the reaction of the pilots to the flight attendant’s little question at that point. We can just imagine what they said. O.K., let’s not imagine that. Well, thank God, the plane turns around, lands, and all is well. **All is well? Kind of.**

Because **the problem is a lot bigger** than a couple of distracted pilots. You see, it’s not just **people** who get distracted. **Churches** get distracted. And I think that’s become a huge problem for the church in America.

I mean ... what would things look like if Satan actually took over a city? The first frames in our imaginative slide show probably depict mayhem on a massive scale: Widespread violence, deviant sexualities, pornography in every vending machine, churches closed down, and

¹ The Introduction and Conclusion are adapted from the newsletter *Mind and Heart* by Dr. Michael Milton, 10/27/09, <http://thecall.rts.edu/>. Mike Milton is the President of Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, NC and will be preaching at Potomac Hills in June. Part of the Introduction is adapted from *Christless Christianity* by Dr. Michael Horton, pages 15-27.

worshippers dragged off to jail.

Over a half-century ago, Donald Grey Barnhouse, pastor of Philadelphia's Tenth Presbyterian Church, gave his CBS radio audience a **very different picture** of what it would look like if Satan took control of a city in America. He said that all of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, pristine streets and sidewalks would be occupied by tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The kids would answer "Yes, sir," "No, ma'am," and the churches would be full on Sunday ... ***where Christ is not preached.***

The enemy has a subtle way of using the scenery and props to obscure the main character. Cultural transformation can become the focus instead of, as **Hebrews 12:2** says, "*Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.*"

As provocative as Barnhouse's illustration remains, it's the same point that's made throughout the story of redemption. The story behind all the headlines of the Bible is the war between the serpent and the offspring of the woman, beginning in **Genesis 3:15**, which is a hostility that God promised would culminate in the serpent's destruction and the lifting of the curse. This promise was a declaration of war on Satan and his kingdom, and the contest unfolded in the first religious war, between Cain and Abel (**Genesis 4**), in the battle between Pharaoh and Yahweh that led to the exodus and the temptation in the wilderness. Even when they were finally in the land, the serpent seduces Israel to idolatry and immorality. Yet God always preserved that "***seed of the woman***" who would crush the serpent's head. The story leads all the way to Herod's slaughter of the firstborn children out of fear of the Magi's announcement of the birth of the true King of Israel.

The Gospels unpack this story line and the epistles elaborate its significance. Everything is leading to the Cross, and when the disciples — even Peter — try to distract Jesus away from that mission in **Matthew 16**, they are being unwitting servants of Satan. We see this problem throughout the Scriptures. **2 Corinthians 4:4-5** tells us, "*In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*"⁵ *For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.*"

Satan lost the war on Good Friday and Easter, but has shifted his strategy to keep the world from hearing the gospel that dismantles his kingdom of darkness. Paul speaks of this cosmic battle in **Ephesians 6**, directing us to the Word, the gospel, Christ and His righteousness, faith and salvation as our only armor against the assaults of the enemy. In **Revelation 12**, the history of redemption is recapitulated, with the dragon sweeping a third of the stars (angels) from heaven, laying in wait to devour the woman's child at birth, only to be defeated by the ascension of the promised offspring. Nevertheless, knowing his time is short; he pursues the child's brothers and sisters.

Wherever Christ is truly proclaimed, Satan is actively present. He seeks to devour the church, employing the same tried and tested methods: not only persecution and martyrdom from without (as we saw last week with the church in Smyrna), but also heresy and schism from within. And Satan knows from experience that sowing heresy and schism is far more effective. While the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, the assimilation of the church to the world **silences** that witness.

It's easy to become **distracted** from Christ as the only hope for sinners. Where everything is measured by happiness rather than by God's holiness, the sense of our being sinners becomes secondary, if not offensive. If we're merely good people who've lost our way

... but with the proper instructions and motivation can become better persons, we only need a life coach, not a redeemer.

And today ... we are routinely tempted toward what can only be called "**Christless Christianity.**" ... Christless Christianity. Sounds a bit harsh, doesn't it? A little shallow perhaps, sometimes distracted, even a little man-centered from time to time, **but Christless?** What that means is that we're getting dangerously close to the place in everyday American church life where the Bible is mined for "relevant" quotes but is largely irrelevant on its own terms; God is used as a personal resource rather than known, worshiped, and trusted; Jesus Christ is a coach with a good game plan for victory rather than a Savior who's already achieved it for us; salvation is more a matter of having our best life now than being saved from God's judgment by God Himself; and the Holy Spirit is an electrical outlet we can plug into for the power we need to be all that we can be.

The message of much of American Christianity has simply become trivial, sentimental, tolerant, irrelevant, and a place **... where Christ is not preached.**

Sadly this is not a new situation ... because it's very similar to a situation in a church a long time ago in a city named Pergamum. And that brings us, finally, to our text this morning, which was written to ...

v. 12-13: A CHURCH IN THE CITY ²

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of Him who has the sharp two-edged sword. ¹³ '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.'"

[Please Put Up The Map]

If you look at this map of Asia Minor, you can see that these churches form a semi-circle, lying along the road which a messenger would have used to deliver John's letter to each of them. And the third church that would receive this letter was Pergamum, about 20 miles inland and 60 miles north of Smyrna.

Pergamum was traditionally known for its worship of the serpent God Asclepius (the god of healing and whose symbol on Pergamum's coins was the serpent). Asclepius as a serpent would remind one of Satan as the serpent and dragon in Revelation.

Pergamum also hosted temples dedicated to Imperial Cult of "the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma" as well as the usual list of Greek gods. Its famous giant altar of Zeus (120 by 112 feet) overlooked the city on its citadel, and some have suggested that this is the background

2 The Exposition of the text is adapted from the books:

Triumph of the Lamb by Dr. Dennis Johnson, pages 75-78

Discipleship on the Edge by Dr. Darrell Johnson, pages 75-86

The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor in their Local Settings by Dr. Colin Hemer, p. 78-105

Seven Deadly Spirits: Revelation's Letters for Today's Church by Dr. T. Scott Daniel, pages 60-72

The New International Greek Testament Commentary: Revelation by Dr. Gregory Beale, pages 245-258

Hard Sayings of the Bible, Revelation notes by Dr. Peter Davids

The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Revelation notes by Dr. John Walvoord

The ESV Study Bible, Revelation notes by Dr. Dennis Johnson

And the sermons:

"*The Truth Shall Set You Free*" by Dr. Robert Rayburn, Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA, 9/21/08

"*The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Part 3)*" by Mark Driscoll, Mars Hill Church, Seattle, WA, 9/7/08

"*To The Church in Pergamum*" by Dr. Kim Riddlebarger, Christ Reformed Church, Anaheim, CA, 2002,

www.christreformed.org

for “*Satan’s throne*” in this verse. He was, after all, the king of the Greek gods.

But the central image in this passage appears to have been that of Roman rule. Pergamum was an independent city until 133 B.C., when its last king willed it to Rome. It thereafter became the capital city of Roman Asia, the seat of the proconsul who had an almost unlimited power ... **including the power of the sword** ... both to fight and to execute capital punishment. This fact will become important as Jesus describes Himself as the One “*who has the sharp two-edged sword.*” The sword is a symbolic representation of the Word of God’s twofold ability to separate believers from the world and to condemn the world for its sin. It was the sword of salvation as well as the sword of judgment.

This throne of Caesar, then, is the throne of Satan. Satan is not identified with Rome totally; he is independent of all of his tools. But it is Roman rulers through whom Satan works, and it is the means through which Satan rules and controls that area, in this case Asia Minor. It is also the means through which he persecutes the church of God.

The key to this identification is the reference to Antipas, a Christian martyr. Given that the proconsul had the power to put people to death, this probably indicates official persecution. Antipas had been martyred. And in the aftermath of his martyrdom the church must have lived in fear, for they were located in the very seat of Roman power and could hardly escape the notice of Rome.

[You Can Turn Off the Map Now, Thanks]

And yet, despite their willingness and ability to stand strong in the face of persecution, Jesus surprises them with ...

v. 14-15: A STRONG REBUKE

“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.”

In the Book of Numbers, chapters 22-25, we find the story of Balaam and his famous donkey. As the Israelites wandered through the wilderness, God had prevented the prophet Balaam from cursing them, so Balaam found a much subtler avenue of attack and advised Moab’s king to send Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men into idolatry and sexual immorality. And so he did, she did, they did, and eventually God came and struck them all dead.

Therefore, Jesus’ characterization of the false teaching in Pergamum with Balaam means that he served as the prototype for any teacher who advocates compromise with pagan society and morals. Now the Nicolaitans were replicating Balaam’s strategy of luring away believers into all kinds of unfaithfulness.

Now they were probably advocating for Christian participation in the pagan ceremonies of that culture. So much of pagan life was affected by its idolatry — the food one ate, the coins one used, the holidays one celebrated, the restaurants one frequented, and so on — so that there was a great temptation for Christians to find ways to accommodate themselves to these surroundings.

On top of all that, the cult of the Roman emperor was everywhere. It had become a badge of citizenship to partake in that type of worship. A great many people no doubt thought it was just plain silly – worshipping a man as a god and a man whose human limitations were perfectly well known – but they did it anyway. The Gentile Christians in the Pergamum Church had been a part of that culture their whole lives. It was simply a way of life for them. They

could easily say that they never took it seriously before they became Christians and they certainly didn't take it seriously afterward. So why make an issue of it now?

But idolatry is connected throughout the Bible with immorality. One leads to the other. That's clear from Romans 1. And so the reference here to sexual immorality may refer to the basic lack of morals that were part and parcel of pagan life and worship. The whole city and its culture were shaped by its temples and its idolatry and its sensual worship with temple prostitutes and all the rest. We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that it was a new thought to many Gentile Christians that their sexual life had to be submitted to the lordship of Christ and that they were required to be chaste as single and faithful as married.

In any case, their argument was probably something like, "Look, these idols aren't real anyway; what difference does it make if we eat food offered to them or participate in the temple rituals. In fact, most of the pagans do these things not out of religious belief but civic duty. We're good citizens too. In that way we can remain friends with our fellow citizens and perhaps in that way we can be a witness to them."

Lurking beneath, however, were the attractions of sensuality and worldliness as well as the safety that came through accommodation to the prevailing culture. Today we live in an unprecedented sensual culture, very much like the culture of Balaam and of Pergamum. And Christians are deciding in great numbers that the sexual ethics of the Bible are just too hard. And if some aren't openly advocating a promiscuous life, they're simply practicing it with a less troubled conscience. Promiscuity has become more and more common in a time and place such as ours and to stand against it requires great determination.

Or consider the relativism and pluralism of our culture, the insistence on every side for tolerance of all manner of outlooks and viewpoints. So what's the problem? **The problem is the truth!** That unyielding, fixed, absolute standard that refuses to be trimmed or shaved in any way. The one who has a sharp, two-edged sword coming out of His mouth has spoken and He has said that faithfulness to Him and a life of Christian integrity **cannot** be reconciled to pagan practices, **cannot** be harmonized with pagan worship, **cannot** be friendly with a way of life that is offensive to God. The problem is that God forbids both idolatry **and** immorality. The temptation is that Christians should begin to imagine that people can be saved who aren't Christians at all. The problem is there is but one way to God and heaven and that is the way of faith in Jesus Christ.

Why is Jesus so intolerant? In our day tolerance is **exalted** as a great virtue, especially on moral and religious matters. But here Jesus presents Himself as **passionately intolerant**. Why? Because Jesus loves the truth, Jesus **speaks** the truth, and Jesus **is** the truth. And because, as He claims throughout the Bible, falsehood and deception of any kind **enslaves people**. Jesus is passionately intolerant because He's passionately intolerant of people being **enslaved**. He's especially intolerant of false ideas being taught in His name. So it was in Pergamum. And so He gives them a pretty severe ...

v. 16: WARNING

"Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of My mouth."

What God has revealed to be true is that there are standards by which we live, **His standards**, and that failing to live by those standards will bring His judgment. There is a correct way to understand the faith and an incorrect way. There is such a thing as orthodoxy and such a thing as heresy. There is such a thing as obedience and such a thing as disobedience. God alone

will judge between them, but He has revealed His will so that we may know what is true and what's not; what's right and what's wrong; what thinking and living belong to heaven and what thinking and living belong to hell.

Again, as in the first letter, there is a warning that if this sin is **not repented of** the Lord will judge the church. The sin of the church was its tolerance of this lack of Christian faithfulness among some, if not many, of her members. The Lord would come to the entire church but His wrath would be particularly directed at the heretics. Remember, Pergamum was a city with the power of the sword, and now Jesus is letting people know that, in comparison, **the sword He bears is far more powerful**. It reminds us of Jesus' saying in **Matthew 10:28**, "*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*"

You will notice that "*the sword of my mouth*" ties the end of the letter with the description of Christ at the beginning of the letter. The believers are being reminded where the real judgment and the real power is to be found. The empire can threaten those who don't conform with exile and hunger, but Christ offers sustenance that the world cannot comprehend. The empire can exclude those who don't profess allegiance to its power, but Christ offers the faithful a white stone and a new name — a token of acceptance and inclusion into the heavenly banquet.

And so the church is being given the opportunity to repent of this unbiblical tolerance of idolatry and sexual immorality. And if they do truly repent, then Jesus makes them ...

v. 17: A PROMISE³

"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."

Again the letter concludes as do the others with a promise of eternal life to those who remain faithful. Manna was the supernatural food supplied to the Israelites during their sojourn from Egypt to Canaan. In this case the promise takes the form of their eating the food of the messianic feast at the end of the age. If they were faithful in rejecting the tainted food of pagan Pergamum, the Lord would give them heavenly food in due time.

But what about this odd reference to "*a white stone*"? In my reading I found over a dozen possible interpretations, but one made more sense to me as it fit the context of Pergamum being the place of judgment. In an ancient court of law, when defendants were condemned, they received a black stone with their name on it. If they were acquitted, they received a white stone. Similarly, those who have trusted Jesus Christ for salvation will receive an acquittal from the judgment of God. The white stone is a picture of unearned acquittal.

The "*new name*" seems to refer to the name of the faithful believer, an idea drawn from **Isaiah 62:2**, "*The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.*" It is an image for a new age, a new situation, a new life, all of which awaits those who are faithful to the Lord. All through Revelation both "*white*" and "*new*" are adjectives of heavenly things.

There is something eerily contemporary about this letter written nearly 2000 years ago: a city proud of its sophistication, but sensual and worldly in its outlook; a Christian church being tempted to accommodate its ethics to those of the surrounding culture; and a growing rift

³ The information on the white stone comes from the devotional Our Daily Bread, 5/11/05, by Dennis Fisher, found at www.rbc.org/devotionals/our-daily-bread/2005/05/11/devotion.aspx

between church and society. What is there about the church in Pergamum that we cannot immediately identify with?

So how does the Balaam's of the world seduce us with false teaching?

One of the most common ways is simply through **distraction**.

Which brings us back to where we started ... because we're ...

CONCLUSION: *Still Distracted*

We're going back to the distracted pilots and the airplane. We can thank God that the plane turned around, landed, and all is well. **All is well?** Kind of.

Neil Postman's work is helpful to us at this point. In his books, *Technopoly* and *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the late, famous author and professor from NYU prophetically warned that we are **distracted** by many things. But the issue goes even deeper than the distractions of a new computer program.

The truth is that even when we punish teenagers and airline pilots for spending too much time on their computers and not paying attention, we still have this problem of **human beings getting distracted**.

Theologically, this is a result of the fall. That is the epic but very real rebellion of mankind as taught in Genesis (and in Paul's Epistle to the Romans and in so many other places and is, in fact, the second great point of a Christian worldview: Creation, Fall, Redemption) in which all humankind and creation itself is subjected to a deep, humanly incurable condition that mars the original product.

The problem is that we're sinners. And sinners, among other things, **get distracted**. You see, even when the matter at hand, the lives of hundreds of people, demands our utmost attention, training, experience and dedication ... we can just look away. We fiddle with our iPhones as our cars move at high speeds amidst other people in their cars moving at high speeds who are **also** fiddling with their iPhones. And, of course, one mistake, one look away, one distraction and you end up on the front page of the newspaper. Or you end up with a broken home. Or a lost career. Or an eternal destiny unsettled, or a rejection of the God who made you, whose creation speaks of His presence, and whose law is written on your heart. **But you get distracted**. You Miss His Gospel. You overshoot your destination. You fly too high, too long, and disregard every voice that comes at you. Other things just have your attention.

And the truth is, whether we are flying planes, or running a business, or leading a congregation, or arguing cases in court, or raising a family, being a friend or a son or a daughter, we can **all get distracted**. We get distracted by the most inane things; things like computer programs. Or other women (maybe even soul mates in Argentina). Or pornography. Or new cars. Or buying houses we can't afford. Or really nifty, new religions that promise everything. Or sweet-talking spiritual gurus who tell us to go meditate in sweat houses in the heat of Arizona until we die. You get the picture ... I hope. The answer is not to say, "Oh, **now** I'll focus on my job! **Now**, I'll focus on my family!" The idea is to listen to the voice. The flight attendant that asks, "By the way, where are we?" comes to us in all sorts of ways.

Thank God she asked the question. And thank God that the Word of God comes to us in all sorts of voices, through Pastors and Podcasts and Sunday School teachers and books given at Christmas, and sometimes in the gift of a child who asks, "Dad, is there a God? And why are we here? And where are we going?"

It is in listening to the voice, the voice that is really the voice of God speaking through His Word, the Bible, attested to by the voice of His Son, Jesus.

For we are all hurling through time and space, flying high, with so much at stake. And we can all get distracted. But thank God that there is a divine interruption that comes to us now, if only we will hear, **Matthew 17:5**, “*This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him.*”

After all, He’s the King.
 And He’s coming back.
 And He has a sharp two-edged sword.
 And He is **not** distracted.

Think about that. You need to pray.
 Take a moment to do that, and then I’ll close.

Heavenly Father, thank You for this revelation. Thank you that it does unveil to us our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We pray, Lord, that you will help us to understand these things and more than that, to take seriously what is written, to keep these revelations and let them adjust our lives to what they reveal. We ask that You would help us to learn the truth, know the truth, speak the truth, and only tolerate the truth. We ask that You would do this ... in the Name of Your Son, Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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Revelation 19:11-16

“Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The One sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges ... ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is The Word of God. ... ¹⁵ From His mouth comes a sharp sword ... ¹⁶ On His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.”