

We have come to the third of the seven letters to the churches recorded in Revelation 2-3. These are messages from the exalted and glorified Lord Jesus Christ to seven specific churches located in what today is Turkey. There were more churches in that area and many more throughout the ancient world, but these seven represent all churches. In a way that is similar to the letters of Paul to specific churches, they deal with issues in a single church, but all churches are meant to read the letters and apply them to their own situation. We are not exactly like any of these churches and yet, we are meant to carefully consider each of these letters and consider our own strengths and weakness in the light of them. In some areas Jesus' commendations may apply. And in some areas his criticisms may apply.

It is interesting to think about how we think about our own church in the light of the word of God. None of us, I think, think of our church as a perfect church. That would be arrogant and foolish. And yet, we are part of this church and not another presumably because we feel that this is generally a faithful church. No doubt we would all like to see some things different, but there must also be some things that correspond to some extent to the biblical teaching of what a church should be like. We can and we should think positively about the church to which we belong while at the same time praying for and contributing to the church moving closer to the biblical ideal.

As a confessional church in the Reformed Presbyterian tradition, we are considerably interested in the whole area of biblical faithfulness also in what it means to be faithful as a church. The whole area of being faithful to the word of God is a considerable emphasis in our teaching and in the way we conduct our worship services and the rest of our congregational life. This is part of our heritage. We bind ourselves with vows through which we solemnly swear before God and one another that we accept the Bible as the highest authority for doctrine and life. Leaders swear before God and the church that we will be faithful to God's word in the way we conduct our ministries. We take seriously the biblical teaching that elders (which includes ministers) must according to Titus 1:9, "hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that [we] may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

It is possible and necessary to belong to what you consider to be a church that is faithful to the word of God. We can think of our church in that way with humble thankfulness while recognizing that we must continuously seek to be more faithful. And part of that is evaluating ourselves carefully in the light of the Word of God which is what we are doing by studying these letters of Jesus to the seven churches. Today we look at what Jesus said to the church in Pergamum.

Jesus refers to Pergamum as the location of Satan's throne. "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is." Pergamum was an important center for both pagan and emperor worship. There were many temples in the city and Pergamum was one of the first cities to erect a temple in honor of the Roman emperor. And it was especially the demand to worship the Roman emperor that was the reason for the persecutions of Christians during this time period. In certain situations, people were required to show their loyalty to the Roman Empire

by engaging in some act of worship of the Roman emperor. Sometimes they were also required to curse Christ. An unwillingness to do that was judged to be a lack of loyalty to the state and often resulted in some penalty – including imprisonment and even death.

It is interesting that even today, Christianity is often viewed as disloyalty to the state. That is because we confess Jesus to be higher in authority to any human authority. The confession, “Jesus is Lord” has often been seen to be subversive to the authority of the state and has been the reason for a great deal of persecution. That is what was going on in Pergamum. The persecution seemed to be more intense here than in other places because of the enthusiasm for the worship of the emperor and so this is one of the things that Jesus addresses in his communication to the church in Pergamum. Verse 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.”

The church in Pergamum is commended for standing firm in the face of persecution. One of their number had been killed. And the church as a whole continued to confess Jesus’ name and did not deny their faith. Clearly not everyone who remained faithful was killed. But they were suffering. There was the possibility of being killed as one of their number had been. But they had stood firm. And the Lord commends them for that.

It is interesting that a church can be faithful in the face of persecution even when there are other serious issues with that church. Jesus will go on to bring up some things that he had against this church. There were serious problems in that church. And yet they were faithful in the sense of being willing to suffer for the name of Christ. Clearly being willing to suffer and even die for the name of Christ is not necessarily a sure sign that the person who is being persecuted is even truly saved. It seems likely that the believers at Pergamum were true Christians who were weak in some areas, but Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:3 says that “if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” There are people who are not saved who are willing to die for whatever it is they believe. There are people from false religions who are willing to die for their faith.

In the case of the church at Pergamum, they were commended by Jesus for the way they withstood persecution and yet he has serious problems with them. A willingness to endure persecution is a good thing, but it is not necessarily a sign that all is well in that church.

He describes what is wrong in verses 14-15, “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. So also you have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”

Balaam was the guy in the OT who was spoken to by a donkey and who answered back without missing a beat. The OT situation that involves Balaam went like this: Israel is travelling through the wilderness towards the promised land. She camps near the territory of Moab. Balak, king of Moab, is afraid of what the people of

Israel might do to his territory and people and so he sends his servants to Balaam who was a pagan diviner – a kind of sorcerer – to hire him to pronounce a curse on Israel. In the story that follows God forces Balaam to bless Israel instead of cursing them. That story is told in Numbers 22-24. Then in Numbers 25, however, we read that the people of Israel, “began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.” Then we read in Numbers 25:3, “Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.” God sent a plague and 24000 people were killed.

It is very significant, from the point of view of our text in Revelation, that 6 chapters further in the book of Numbers we read that the women of Moab, “on Balaam’s advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came upon the congregation of the LORD.” So when God made it impossible for Balaam to directly curse the people of Israel, he advised the Moabites to send in women to tempt the men of Israel to sexual immorality and they were even able to get them to make sacrifices to the pagan gods. So Balaam in a roundabout way was successful in getting God to send a plague upon his people.

Jesus, in our text, is saying that there were those among the congregation of Pergamum who were holding to 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.” Jesus goes on to say in verse 15 “So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.” The commentators think that this was basically the same thing as the teaching of Balaam.

So what Jesus has against the church of Pergamum is that there were some in the congregation who held to the teaching of Balaam. And that teaching of Balaam was to instruct “Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.” So what Jesus is referring to is teaching that tempts people to idolatry and sexual sin. The teaching of Balaam in the OT story had led to the worship of idols and sexual immorality. And so what Jesus is speaking about is people in the congregation who were teaching that it was ok to be involved in the pagan worship that surrounded them and the sexual immorality that went along with that. This was a false teaching that minimized the biblical call to flee both idolatry and sexual immorality. It was a false teaching that encouraged the members of the church to compromise the strict calling of God to keep unspotted from the world.

That language comes from James 1 where Christians are told to “keep [themselves] unspotted from the world.” Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:17 quotes from the OT, “Therefore go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord and touch no unclean thing.” He continues in 2 Corinthians 7:1 “Since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of the Lord.” As Christians we are to be a holy people. One of the blessings of salvation is that we are

enabled by the Holy Spirit to begin to live holy lives. In Romans 12:2 we are told: “Do not be conformed to this world....”

What was happening in the church in Pergamum was that teachers were being tolerated whose teaching encouraged a relaxing of this call to separation from the world and thus compromised the biblical call to holy living.

But the heart of the problem was a failure to exercise church discipline. What Jesus has against this church is that they were allowing the false teaching to continue in the church. Jesus says, “But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam....” And verse 15, “So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”

The problem was that the elders of the congregation were allowing those who held to such teaching to remain in the congregation. This is in contrast to the church in Ephesus who were commended because they “[could] not bear with those who are evil, but [had] tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.”

The failure at Pergamum was a failure to discipline. The church, through her elders, is called upon to discipline those who are living in unrepentant sin and that includes disciplining those who are encouraging worldly living. Jesus here is making it clear that failure to exercise church discipline is a very serious matter. Those who were holding to the teaching of Balaam were to be called to repentance and if they would not repent they should have been removed from the church. What Jesus had against the church at Pergamum is that they tolerated that kind of influence in the church.

1 Corinthians 5 is one of the passages in the NT that deals with church discipline. There Paul makes the point that allowing an unrepentant sinner to remain in the church is allowing that sin to spread throughout the church. He uses the illustration of the way in which yeast works its way through a whole lump of flour. 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you are really unleavened.”

The first reason for church discipline is the hope that the sinning person will repent. But one of the other reasons for it is to keep false teaching and sin from spreading in the congregation. Jesus was very displeased with the congregation at Pergamum because of her failure to exercise church discipline. There were people in the congregation who held to the teaching of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans and that was leading to idolatry and sexual immorality.

The lack of church discipline is one of the reasons for the moral and spiritual decline of the church. Many churches do not even have formal membership rolls. Without formal membership church discipline is impossible. If there is no formal membership it is impossible to remove unrepentant sinners from the church.

There is no way of knowing who belongs and who do not belong. And that leaves the church open to all kinds of dangerous influences without any way to remove them from the congregation.

Failure to exercise church discipline is one of the reasons for the worldliness of so much of the church today. That is not to say that exercising discipline guarantees that world will not influence the church. We are all exposed to worldly influences through our interaction with the world. But church discipline is one of the means that God has given to help the church resist the temptation to drift into tolerating worldly living among the people of God. And Jesus' criticism of the church in Pergamum is a powerful reminder of how seriously he takes the practice of church discipline.

It is important to note that church discipline is much more than the formal process that leads to excommunication if there is no repentance. It begins with preaching and teaching. It begins with making clear in the preaching what God expects of his people and how important it is to repent of sin and live holy lives. The word "discipline" is related to the word "discipleship" and so all that the church does formally and informally to encourage holy living is part of the discipline that the church is to exercise. It must be clear from the preaching and teaching that living in sin and not repenting of sin is incompatible with the Christian confession.

So truths like what Paul teaches in Galatians 5:19-21 must be part of the teaching ministry of the church. ¹⁹"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Making it clear that those who live in these kinds of sins will not inherit the kingdom of God is part of the overall ministry of discipline in the church. And any neglect of these kinds of warnings could fall under Jesus' condemnation of the church of Pergamum.

Jesus calls the church at Pergamum to repentance. Verse 16, "Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth." As we saw with respect to the other churches we have looked at so far, the call to repentance is the gospel in these passages. The call to repentance is the good news that there is a way to escape the judgment of Christ. Repentance is the way to forgiveness. Repentance and faith are the way we are to respond when Scripture exposes our sins. And they are the way to forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration. Jesus gives these serious warnings to the church because of his love. He sees that they are drifting away from him and he will not just let them go and so he exposes their sins and calls them to return to him in repentance.

But the call to repentance is serious business. Jesus says that if the church at Pergamum would not repent: "I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth." The vision of the exalted Christ in Revelation 1 describes Jesus as having a sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. Jesus' introduction

of himself in the letter to the church in Pergamum was, “The words of him who has the sharp two edged sword.”

The sword coming out of Jesus’ mouth means different things in different contexts. In this context it is clear that it is the sword of judgment. If they did not repent, Jesus was going to “war against them with the sword of his mouth.” The sword is the word of God that brings salvation to those who repent and judgment to those who do not. That is why it is a 2 edged sword.

Jesus’ final word in this section is once again a promise to those who conquer. To conquer in the context of this passage would be to maintain discipline in the church so that the members are living lives of holiness – repenting of idolatry and sexual immorality – fighting the fight of faith. Faithfulness never means perfection, but it does mean being engaged in the fight against sin in our lives – seeking to live lives of holiness – lives that are pleasing to God and not living lives that are conformed to the pressures of the world around us.

Fighting is hard and so encouragement is necessary. And in these passages Jesus’ encouragement in the fight has to do with the reward that is promised for those who conquer.

First he says that he will give “some of the hidden manna” to the one who conquers. Manna was the supernaturally supplied food that sustained the people of Israel during the wilderness journey to the promised land. The best way to interpret the manna in this verse is in the light of Jesus teaching in John 6. In John 6:32 Jesus says “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven” Verse 33, “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” Verse 35 “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

The hidden manna that Jesus promises to those who conquer is himself as the bread of life. And it is the ultimate satisfaction of all our hungers and thirsts. When people turn to idols and sexual immorality they are trying to satisfy desires in ways that cannot truly satisfy. But Jesus is saying, if you conquer by repenting of sin and striving for holiness I will give you the bread of life and you shall never hunger or thirst again. Revelation 7:16 says of the saints in heaven, “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore.” While we are in this life we experience the beginning of this through feeding on Christ – through believing on him and loving him and being loved by him. Those who conquer will feed on the hidden manna – the bread of life – and they will experience a fullness and a satisfaction that are only hinted at in this life.

We will now celebrate the Lord’s Supper. One of the themes of the Lord’s Supper is feeding on Christ. By meditating on Christ’s broken body and shed blood and by receiving them by faith we feed on Christ and we know a beginning of that satisfaction that we will know in perfection at the marriage supper of the Lamb. And that is a huge incentive for us to continue fighting the fight of faith – the fight to resist the temptations to idolatry and all manner of worldliness because we have already tasted and seen that the Lord is good and that

taste is enough to sustain us as we long for the fullness that we will experience when the struggle is over and we experience the blessedness the promise of which has sustained us along the way.

Table Meditation

Jesus also promises to those who conquer: “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.” In the Jewish judicial system, those involved in the verdict would vote by means of putting either a white or a black stone into a container. The white stone meant “not guilty.” The black stone “guilty.” Another way that a white stone was used was as a pass to be admitted into a special event. It is not known exactly what Jesus means by the white stone, but it has something to do with access into the presence of God in the kingdom of God. It may be understood as an invitation to the heavenly banquet.

Those who conquer – who persist in the fight of faith – who do not give up and embrace the ways of the world – they will receive this white stone – which signifies access into the presence of God.

The name on the stone is probably that of Christ as Lord. Knowing that name is the knowledge of God that believers have in the here and now, but will have in much greater fullness in the time to come. Psalm 52:5 speaks about how the enemies of God and his people despise the name of the Lord and it goes on to say in verse 6, “Therefore my people shall know my name. Therefore in that day they shall know that it is I who speak; here I am.”

God reveals his name to his people. They will know it in a much greater way in the great day of the Lord.

The Lord’s Supper is about nourishing us in the fight. It is about looking forward to the return of Christ. And it is those things rooted in the meaning of the death of Christ. The truth that most strengthens us in the fight against sin is the fact that our sins are forgiven through the death of Christ. The fight of faith is not the way to be saved – it is what it means to be saved. Conquering is not a form of works righteousness. It is what we are enabled to do in the power of the gospel.

The Lord’s Supper is intended to assure us that Christ freely gives himself to us and that we receive him by faith. The strength that we need to overcome is not something that we dredge up by our own efforts, it comes from the assurance God’s love and acceptance on the basis of the broken body and shed blood of Christ. The great motivators in the Christian life are God’s forgiveness and acceptance and the resulting love and joy and hope.

The things that Jesus holds out to us as encouragements in these passages are of no encouragement unless we are confident that we will receive them. And that confidence is not rooted in our own doings, but in what Jesus has done for us and what he continues to do. The Lord’s Supper is an encouragement along the way that Jesus really does give himself to us as surely as he gives us the bread and the wine that symbolize his broken body and shed blood.

So let us press on in the fight – the fight to put God first in our lives – the fight for holiness and purity – let us press on in the fight encouraged by what Jesus has already done for us and by what he holds out before us if we conquer in his name and by his strength.