

KING OF THE JUNGLE

SERMON TITLE: THE WRONG DOSE IN PERGAMOS REVELATION 2:12-17

Once a man walked into the drug store and asked the pharmacist if he had anything for the hiccups? The pharmacist walks around the counter and slaps him across the face three times - *bam, bam, bam*. The customer was shocked! “*Why in the world, did you do that?*” The pharmacist answers, “*Well, you don’t have the hiccups any more, do you?*” The fellow replies, “*No, but my wife out in the car, still does!*”

Well, that was a groaner. Let me try again... *How many pharmacists does it take to change a light bulb? One, but he has to do it three times a day for five days.* I’ll stop there... *three strikes and you’re out!*

But here’s why I bring up the pharmacist... A pharmacist doesn’t examine patients, and diagnose illnesses, and write prescriptions. That’s a doctor’s job. The doctor prescribes the medicine. The role of a pharmacist is to simply carry out the doctor’s orders.

And this is the job of the Church. Jesus is the Great Physician. The Church is just the pharmacist. Doctor Jesus puts the stethoscope to the chest of the church. He diagnoses the ailment and writes the prescription. That’s what we have in Revelation

2-3. Jesus writes seven prescriptions to seven sick churches. Our job is to read the prescriptions and follow Doctor's orders.

But that's not what was happening in Pergamos. Here's the title of today's message, "[The Wrong Dose in Pergamos.](#)" This was a church that failed to fill the prescription. They compromised the will of God. They wrote their own prescription - doled out their own meds - instead of following Doctor's instructions. Pergamos was the third of Jesus' letters to the seven churches. First we had "[Loveless in Ephesus.](#)" The second letter we titled, "[Suffering in Smyrna.](#)" Now Pergamos is the third church in Asia to visit the Doctor.

Understand, in 70 AD when the Jewish uprising in Israel was squashed by the Roman General Titus and his Legion, the Jews were scattered all around the world. The [Great Diaspora](#) (or *Dispersion*) had begun. Many of the Jews who left Jerusalem and its suburbs were Christians. And one of the places where these believers settled was in the Greco-Roman cities of Asia Minor - the area known today as western Turkey. This Roman province became a hotbed for Christian activity. Churches sprang up all across the region. The Apostle John - the last of Jesus' first twelve disciples - became pastor of the church at Ephesus. And when Jesus chose to send letters to seven of these churches, He did so through the pen of John.

Jesus' letter to the Church at Pergamos begins in 2:12, "[And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword...'](#)" "[Pergamos](#)" or [Pergamum](#) was a city 100 miles north of Ephesus, and 50

miles from Smyrna. It sat twelve miles inland off the Aegean Sea. Today, the Roman ruins of Pergamos are located on a mountain northeast of the Turkish city of Bergama.

In John's day, Pergamos was already a tourist attraction. It was located near the ruins of the ancient port of Troy - the recipient of the famed Trojan horse. In the year 100 AD, Pergamos wasn't the largest city in Asia, or even the most beautiful or prosperous, but for the prior 250 years it had been the Roman capitol. Pergamos had the richest history and heritage of all the cities in the region. Roman author, Pliny, called Pergamos, "by far the most distinguished city in Asia."

The ancient city of Pergamos was built on top of a cone-shaped mountain. Its Acropolis, or high point, towered 1000 feet above the Caicus River Valley. The Acropolis at Pergamos was home to a plethora of idolatrous shrines and religious temples. Pergamos was the hotbed of paganism in the Roman province. In fact, when Babel, the birthplace of spiritual rebellion, fell to the Persians in 535 BC, the Babylonian priests moved their headquarters, and set up shop in Pergamos. The ancient cult of Nimrod moved west. The worship of Nimrod's wife, Semiramis, and their son, Tammuz, found a new home in Pergamos.

No wonder the Lord says in verse 13, "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is." At the heart of "Satan's throne" - high above the city, on it's Acropolis, set the city's signature monument, an altar dedicated to the chief of all the Greek gods, Zeus. Zeus was portrayed as a bull, and at the center of the altar was a

hollowed out bronze bull. The bull was heated like an oven, and sacrifices were placed inside.

The Altar of Zeus was actually a colonnaded courtyard. It stood tall, and was visible from a distance. The famous altar became synonymous with the city. What the Space Needle is to Seattle - and the arch is to St. Louis - the Altar of Zeus was to Pergamos.

Today, you can visit the actual Altar at the Pergamum Museum in Berlin. In the late 19th century German archaeologists working in Asia dug up the Altar of Zeus and reassembled it stone by stone back in Germany. When Hitler came to power a Nazi architect, Albert Speer, was commissioned to build a stadium to host his propaganda rallies. Speer used the Altar of Zeus as inspiration for the Zeppelin Tribunal in Nuremberg. Zeppelin Field is where Hitler announced his plan to exterminate the Jews. The term “[the final solution](#)” was first coined from the podium inspired by the Altar of Zeus. The bull was replaced with Nazi incinerators, and the fires of Zeus with the flames of the Holocaust. Later, Albert Speer was given the title, “[the Nazi who said sorry.](#)” At the Nuremberg War Trials, Speer admitted, “[It’s hard to recognize the devil when he has his hand on your shoulder.](#)” Jesus though had no problem recognizing Satan. He saw his influence over Pergamos. He called it, “*where Satan’s throne is...*”

But the Altar of Zeus was just one of the reasons the title “*Satan’s throne*” could be applied to Pergamos. The city boasted of other temples. In 29 BC a temple was built

to honor the Roman Emperor Augustus. Like Smyrna, Pergamos was a center for emperor worship.

There was also a temple to Athena - the goddess of wisdom and academic knowledge. Pergamos was home to one of antiquity's largest libraries. It contained 200,000 hand-written volumes. The collection was later a gift from Mark Anthony to his mistress, Cleopatra. The Pergamites wrote on calf-skin or parchments. The term "parchment" is from the name "*Pergamos.*"

And ironically, just down the street from the *Temple of Wisdom* was a temple to Dionysius or Bacchus - *the height of foolishness*. Dionysius was the god of wine and merriment. He was the party god. His worship involved feasts of drunkenness and sexual perversion. Prostitutes served as priestesses of Dionysius.

There was one other famous center in Pergamos. In the Lower City sat another temple - to the Roman god of healing, Asklepios. The Temple of Asklepios doubled as a spa. Ill and depressed people from all over the empire journeyed to Pergamos to be treated. The cult of Asklepios offered dream therapy, and early forms of psychiatry, and many occult-type cures.

The god of Asklepios was symbolized by a snake on a stick. The image has been adopted by the American Medical Association as their logo... In the temple of Asklepios non-poisonous snakes were allowed to roam free. One of the therapies was to lie all night in the temple, and allow the snakes to crawl over your body.

Hey, if a pharmacist had handed me that kind of prescription *he* would've deserved a slap in the face! Years later, in the reign of Diocletian, a few Christian stonecutters were martyred by Roman authorities when they refused to carve images of this snake god. Christian believers obviously associated the Asklepios, and the snake, with Satan - as did Jesus. In this letter, He refers to Pergamos as *"Satan's throne..."*

In verse 13, Jesus says, *"I know... where you dwell..."* Whenever I hear those words I think of a story my father tells. Fifty years ago, dad was employed by the phone company. He worked on the mainframe. At the time my stay-at-home mom started receiving obscene phone calls while dad was at work. Since he had access to the mainframe he could trace where the calls had originated. He tracked them to an address. One day, Dad waited outside the house, and studied the young man who was making the calls. He saw what the kid was wearing, and the car he drove. Later that night Dad called the boy, and warned him, *"I know where you live..."* He said, *"Call my wife again, and I'll come after you!"* Mom never got another obscene call.

Yet that's not the tone of voice I hear from Jesus. He is not threatening them, He's encouraging the Church. *"I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is."* Jesus is saying, I know you live in a pagan place. You're surrounded by temptation and opposition. Like a San Francisco or Las Vegas the Satanic influence was strong and heavy in Pergamos. Satan and his demons had a tighter grip on this city than he did on cities like Jerusalem or Ephesus.

Pergamos was a tough place to be a Christian. The spiritual climate was particularly sinister in Pergamos - and that can be true for certain cities, or families, or High Schools, or work places, or colleges, or hang outs... The evil influence is more prevalent.

Jesus knew this was true of Pergamos. Satan had a grip on this city, but there were believers who had a grip on Jesus... Verse 13, *“I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”* We know very little about this Antipas. You could say, he, along with many more like him, is a man unknown to the history books, but is a hero in the eyes of God. There is a tradition that Antipas was the faithful and fearless pastor of the Church at Pergamos. When he refused to bow his knee to the Emperor he was cooked alive inside the belly of the bronze bull at the Altar. However he died, Jesus points to Pastor Antipas with pride and calls him - not just *“a faithful martyr”* - but *“My faithful martyr.”* Antipas' sacrifice, like all sacrifices for the cause of Christ, is cherished by Jesus.

The name *“Antipas”* might also give us a clue into the man's character. It means *“against ancestors.”* A huge part of paganism is ancestor worship. The gods and goddesses of the ancient world existed to reconnect people to their deceased loved ones.

Like the beliefs of North American Indians local Greeks thought they received guidance and help from their forefathers. Antipas saw this as superstition. He trusted in Jesus alone - *even though it got him killed.*

And apparently, their pastor's example emboldened the Church at Pergamos. Jesus says of them, "*you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith...*" Here's a Church that was willing to take a stand! When push came to shove - when their backs were against the wall - they refused to bow their knee to the Emperor, or to *Zeus* - even if it cooked their *goose!* The Church at Pergamos were commended by Jesus for bravely stopping short of denying their faith.

But isn't there more to being a disciple of Jesus than refusing to deny the faith, and holding fast His name? *What about living for the Lord? What about growing in faith, and living out the will of God? It's good that I refuse to retreat, but how am I advancing in the faith?*

This is why - as with most of the seven letters to the seven churches - Jesus follows His *commendation* with some *correction...* Jesus writes, verse 14, "*But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel...*" Jesus draws on a story in the OT. You'll find Balaam in Numbers 22-24, and then again in Numbers 31. Balaam first comes to mind as the prophet who had a conversation with a donkey. And I'm not talking your boss, or teenager, or spouse. I mean a real donkey! Balaam chatted with a real-life Mr. Ed.

Actually, he was a sorcerer by trade - an occult practitioner - a wizard - an ancient Harry Potter. He was an oracle for hire. He doled out curses for a fee. When Moses led the nation of Israel through the wilderness, they passed through Moab, the land of King Balak. The king didn't like Israel trespassing his borders, so he went to the Yellow Pages for a wizard. He hired this Balaam to cast a curse on the enemy. But each time Balaam opened his mouth to utter the curse out came a blessing. God kept sabotaging his efforts. God refused to allow Balaam to curse Israel.

And this angered King Balak. This is not what Balaam was paid to do. He was getting big bucks. Premium wizard wages. Balaam needed to put up or shut up. *Come up with a curse or forfeit the purse?* This got Balaam's attention. He was greedy. Money was his motivation. Balaam cared more about a big payday than being used by God to bless God's people.

Balaam admitted to the king that God was more powerful than he. *God's blessing trumped his curses.* We should note, if all the Voodoo doctors in Haiti tried to curse us, they couldn't. God has chosen to stand in their way. Jesus promises to protect us from the evil One. 1 John 4:4 promises us, "You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." *God is greater than Harry Potter!* The wizard's spells were powerless, but Balaam still wanted his money. So to collect his devilish fee, he charged for his counsel. There was a way the King of Moab could insure that Israel would shoot themselves in the foot. If he enticed them to rebel, God would judge them Himself.

Balaam tells the king to round up all the girls from *the Hooters* in Moab - and the “*Moab Gone Wild*” videos - along with kegs of Bud - then send the beer and babes into the camp to seduce the men of Israel. Balak did exactly what Balaam suggested, and sadly it worked! Though God turned back the curses, He had no other choice, but to judge Israel’s compromise. And this is what happened in Pergamos. The Church compromised. When it was deny the faith or die - they were willing to honor Jesus with their dying. *The problem was with their living!* They lowered the bar - dropped the standard. Rather than follow the Doctor’s instructions, they started writing their own prescriptions. It was “[The wrong dose in Pergamos.](#)”

Understand, the Church is like a ship. Ships are made to be in the water. But if water gets into a ship there’s problems. Likewise, the Church is built by God to be in the world. Our Lord wants us to shine His light and flavor culture with the Gospel and with grace. But when the world gets into the Church we sink. Compromise springs the leak. When the Church accepts human wisdom, and lives in godless ways, and adopts worldly philosophies - Jesus is against us.

At the **Temple to Augustus**, everyone tipped their hat to the Emperor, and cooperated with the status quo. [Why did the Christians have to be so intolerant?](#) At the **Temple of Athena**, Pergamites were sold the value of free-thinking - *make up your own rules.* [Why be a Christian and live in an intellectual straight-jacket?](#) At the **Temple of Dionysius** friends let their hair down. They partied every weekend. Everybody was doing it - what’s wrong with a little fun now and then? [The Christians](#)

were the party poopers. If God made wine and sex - why be limited by antiquated morals?

At the **Temple of Asklepios** methods were being used that helped and healed - why get caught up in the powers behind them. Why be afraid of a snake? *Those Christians want to see evil behind everything.* At the **Altar of Zeus**, the gods of this world seemed so powerful and progressive. *Why would anyone humble themselves and join the lackluster Christians?*

Christians in Pergamos were being pressured. They were being challenged and tempted to cave in to the world around them. *A compromise here - a little there...* These Christians wanted to influence their city. They wanted to prove that you can be a Christian and it still be cool. *Christians do love, and are free and have fun.* In fact, a life in love with Jesus - and submitted to His prescription - is the only way to real fun and freedom. Without Him we end up a slave to our own desires.

But the believers in Pergamos needed to realize God never achieves His will through moral compromise. When the wisdom of the world contradicts the Bible we trust God's Word... My allegiance to Jesus takes precedent over my loyalty to the status quo... Sex and alcohol isn't just a way to have fun and let off steam, they both have spiritual overtones. How I control my appetites is a matter central to my faith. Am I submitted to God's Spirit, or a slave to my flesh?

There's nothing wrong with engaging in the culture of our world. That's part of the ship being in the water. Creativity in food, and fashion, and technology, and sport, and art - can all bring glory to God. As Christians alive in the world we should shape our culture to glorify God - *as long as we don't buy into the spirit of the age*. **We can be culturally relevant, as long as we're spiritually distinct.** What motivates and guides the believer should always be the solid rock of God's Word, not the changing, man-pleasing winds of culture. Compromise happens when we twist, or water down, or swap out, or ignore the truth of God to appease the opinions of men. To accommodate their culture this third Church prescribed [the wrong dose in Pergamos!](#)

The last two weeks we mentioned that not only were the seven churches actual churches, they also relate to successive periods of Church history - and Pergamos is no exception. This is also the compromised Church - the Roman Church from the 4th to the 6th century AD. What proved to be the sinister compromise occurred on the heels of what seemed like Christianity's greatest triumph. The year was 312 AD. The site was the Tiber River in southern Italy. The Emperor had just died. Because he left no clear successor, the throne of Rome was in dispute. Maxentius marched his army from the west. Constantine marched in from the east. The two Roman generals met at the Milvian Bridge.

The Church historian Eusebius reports that during the battle Constantine had a vision. He saw the sign of a cross in the sky. Then he heard a voice in Latin, *"in hoc signo vinces"* or ["In this sign, you shall conquer."](#) Constantine took the vision as a command from God to fight under the banner of Christianity. He did and trounced

Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. In gratitude, Emperor Constantine ended Rome's persecution of Christianity, and overnight made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Imagine the impact of Constantine's conversion... Out of the catacombs came the delighted Christians. Constantine ordered his army to undergo mass baptisms... To encourage the women of Rome to become Christians, the Emperor promised new silk dresses to all who were baptized as Christians... The pagan priests of Mars and Venus were also converted. Sadly, in the rush to embrace Christianity no one considered the genuineness of these conversions.

For the first Christian workers were paid. Church buildings were erected. Men who once survived the arena, now suddenly occupied the seats of power. Christianity had gone from *outhouse* to *penthouse*. Donald Grey Barnhouse writes this summation, "The rags of persecution gave way to softer garments, and the church began to enjoy the feel of silk upon its flesh. Thus the Pergamos stage of church history came into being, when the church was married to the world." No longer was devotion to Jesus the Church's top concern - now it was convenience, power, control...

Constantine wanted everyone to embrace his new religion. He wanted Christianity to be cool! So to make the faith more palatable to the masses of Rome he "*Christianize*" many of the formerly pagan holidays and rituals, by attaching to them Christian significance.

The Roman festival of Ishtar, or Easter - the fertility goddess with her bunnies, eggs, and fertility symbols - was merged with our celebration of the Resurrection. What emerged from this spirit of compromise was a mixed marriage - a new brand of Roman Christianity which included formerly pagan practice, but with no real biblical basis. Things like *praying for the dead, the veneration of the saints and Mary, purgatory, the use of icons, celibacy of the priesthood, and the list goes on.*

Over time these compromises with paganism distracted worshippers from *the centrality of Jesus, the simplicity of faith, and the supremacy of God's Word.* In retrospect, Constantine's strategy did more harm than good. *This is why we give very little credence to church tradition.* Our model for faith and conduct in the Church is the book of Acts - not church traditions. In fact, many traditions are just not biblical!

Here's my point, compromise is never God's strategy. When the church marries the world, and incorporates *pagan ideas* with *Christian truth* - rather than grow and strengthen the Church it weakens us. It's been said, "[A compromised Church preaches a Gospel that if it were a poison it wouldn't hurt, and if it were a medicine it wouldn't heal.](#)" It's just impotent. We forget that in the long run folks need a powerful Gospel - an undiluted, un-compromised Gospel - a message that can truly save a man from the clutches of Satan and transport him into God's Kingdom.

My son Mack has been away at College, and he's tried to find a church. He told me he attended one recently that opened up with a couple of secular songs. It was entertainment, instead of real worship. Then the pastor delivered a message that was

more a pep rally talk - than a challenge from God's Word and a call to repentance... a sermonette for Christian-ettes. My son complained. He demanded more meat on the bone. He needed some spiritual beef to chew on. This is Jesus' complaint with the Pergamos Church...

And the Lord had one more beef... Verse 15, "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate." Again, *Nicolaitan* isn't a type of ice cream. That's *Neopolitan* - not *Nicolaitan*. We identified the word "*Nicolaitans*" earlier in chapter 2. "*Nikan*" or "*Nike*" means "*conqueror*." "*Laos*" or "*Laity*" means "*common people*." Thus, the Nicolaitans were religious leaders who ruled over common-folk.

Prior to Constantine the church met in homes and catacombs. There were few paid pastors. Unlike other religions Christianity had no professional priestly caste. But once Christianity became the favored religion of Rome, and public money began to flow into the coffers of the Church - great cathedrals sprang up. In addition, a hierarchy of professional clergy developed. As a result, a gap grew between pastors and their people. In the beginning of the Church all believers were ministers, and the greatest in the church were servants of all. Ephesus, the Apostolic Church, was commended for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. Servant leadership was the model left to us by Jesus Himself. But by the Age of Pergamos, an entitlement mentality developed among Church leaders. In their minds, the church existed to support the pastor, rather than the pastor being there to serve the people.

It's interesting to me how *“the doctrine of Balaam”* and *“the doctrine of the Nicolaitans”* go together. **A compromised Church is all about convenience.** The bar of behavior is lowered, and belief is diluted, to make it easier for the congregation to comply. And the same is true for leadership. When pastors refuse to serve - and spiritual authority is doled out, without being earned - again, it's all about what's easy.

Recently, I spoke to a new pastor from another State who told me the current trend among church planters is to gain full-time support from the outset. They can accomplish more by giving all their time to church-stuff. I politely disagreed. I told him that in the beginning one thing a new pastor lacked, *that he needed most*, was credibility. And what better way to gain personal credibility than to work a job, and be willing to support himself until the church grows and is able to provide. This is how I started, and how most CCs launch. For several years I worked a warehouse job - then a janitor job - as I learned to pastor. It was a great way to prove *my devotion to God and my love for the Church.*

Our Lord closes His letter to the compromised Church with a call to repent. Verse 16, *“Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* What a warning! Recall how Jesus introduced Himself in verse 12, *“He who has the sharp two-edged sword...”* Jesus threatens to pull a knife on the Church at Pergamos! Imagine, Jesus in a knife fight with His own Church. He says, *“I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.”*

Obviously, you know from Hebrews 4:12, and other passages, the Bible - the Word of God - is that which is “**sharper than any two-edged sword.**” Your Bible may appear to be paper and cowhide, but spiritually speaking, it’s a razor-sharp dagger made of cold steel. And it’s “**two-edged.**” God’s Word cuts coming and going. Before we can use it as **sword** against the devil, the Great Physician may need to use it as a **scalpel** on us. The Bible dissect our motives, and scrapes clean the infection. It’s great *in combat, or for compromise.*

It’s interesting, the citizens of Pergamos were under the sword of Rome. This was evident in the Temple of Augustus as the people paid homage to their Emperor. But the Christians in Pergamos were under a different sword. They brought all of their lives under the authority of God’s Word. Have you done the same? If not, repent! Stop worshipping in the wrong Temple... the temple of free-thought, or status quo, or self-gratification and pleasure, or self-help... Trust the Doctor’s prescription and stop trying to write your own.

This is so important, for **three rewards** are promised to the person who ceases to compromise, and brings all his life under the authority of all of God’s Word... Jesus writes in verse 17, “**To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat.**” Jesus will satisfy your soul with sweet bread. All that you give up to follow Him. All that you’ll miss by staying away from the Acropolis - *the wisdom, and status, and pleasure, and peace of this world* - He’ll make it up to you!

Remember how God fed Israel in the desert - with manna or bread from heaven. It appeared mysteriously each morning. It contained all their daily nutrition - and it was sweet like honey. It satisfied them for forty years. And this is how Jesus promises to satisfy you! The *“hidden (or spiritual) manna”* - isn't something we see, or even know how it appears. It's hidden from our physical senses, but is revealed in our heart. Jesus feeds us with spiritual sweetness and sustenance.

And along with the sweet bread, Jesus makes us another promise, *“And I will give him a white stone...”* This has any number of beautiful meanings... A trial Judge would use a white stone to announce a person's innocence... a white stone was also an invitation to a party... and both apply to the believer who overcomes. Our past is cleared by a full and free forgiveness. And our future anticipates a banquet with our King.

And finally, *“on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.”* Jesus promises those who overcome a brand new name. And any man who was given a girl's name, and been forced to tough it out through this life - with a name like *“Sue”* or *“Sandy”* - can really appreciate this promise! In heaven my name will be *“Rocky!”* or *“Bear!”* or *“Jack Bauer!”* - something really manly. It's my reward.

Actually, it probably won't be a name anyone knows but me and Jesus. He says *“no one knows (it) except him who receives it.”* You'll still call me Sandy, but Jesus will have a special, personal name He'll call me. It'll be like the pet names lovers have for each other.

If we get through this murky, muddy life, where nothing seems clear. Where the world wants to shove us into its mold - and define us by *what we do*, and *how much we have* - rather than *who we are in Christ*. If I live with no compromise - under the authority of God's sword - in the end, Jesus will give me a name. I'll be His... He'll be mine - and to prove it, I'll have a special name that's just between Him and me. What it'll be, I have no idea - but I can't wait to hear Him say it... Don't compromise - and you'll eat *sweet bread*, and you'll get a *white stone*, and you'll hear a *new name*...