

# Sermon 7<sup>th</sup> July 2019

Revelation 2.12-17

Matthew 10.26-39

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

## **Introduction**

- A riddle for you... 2 spies approached an enemy base to plant a bomb
- But the enemy base had a guard, and the only way to get passed the guard was to tell him the password
- The spies didn't know what the password was so they watched and listened carefully to what the enemy soldiers were saying to get inside the base
- The first time the guard said "12" and the first enemy soldier said "6" and the guard let the enemy soldier in
- The next enemy soldier approached and the guard said "6" the enemy said "3" and the guard let him in
- "I think I know what the password is", one of the spies said. "What do you think it is?" the other spy asked. "It's half of the number!" the first spy said as he walked away
- As the first spy approached, the guard said "10" the first spy said "5" and the guard shot him dead
- The other spy then said, "Oh I get it now" he approached the base and the guard said "7" the spy said "5" and the guard let him in
- What is the password? How does the password work?

## Background

- *“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”*
- For seven Sundays, we are looking at the seven letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation
- The first Sunday we began with the Church in Ephesus, then last Sunday it was the turn of the Church in Smyrna, and this Sunday we look to the Church in Pergamum
- Like Smyrna last Sunday, Pergamum was a very important city in the ancient world...
- ...though as an inland city it was not so well placed for commerce, but it was a centre for worship
- Not just the worship of Caesar, or imperial worship, but worship of many gods, and therefore it contained temples of every kind
- In addition, Pergamum was a place of learning and was famed for its library, and name Pergamum is from where we derive the word “parchment”

## Commendation

- Like the other two letters that we have looked at, the letter to the Church in Pergamum begins with a commendation
- First the Lord Jesus introduces Himself with his unique Title for that church but then He immediately looks to commend the Christians there
- *“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in*

*me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives”*

- The Christians in Pergamum are faced with persecution from the ruling authorities
- The phrase “*Satan’s throne*” may refer to one or all of the temples dedicated to Caesar, or to one of the temples of one of the other major gods, or to all of them – they are Satan’s throne
- But the Christians, whatever the opposition from the outside, the imperial authorities or others holding power, they have resisted
- The Christians are commended by the Lord Jesus for keeping the faith, even to the point of death as was the case for Antipas
- And for some churches now, in some parts of the world, this level of persecution exists but not for us in the UK
- However, all churches will face opposition, all will face persecution in some form from the enemy, from the outside
- The persecution may be subtle; the persecution may not involve imprisonment or death – as yet – but the persecution will be there

## **Complaint**

- But, and there is always a “but”, but unfortunately, unlike the Church in Smyrna, the Lord Jesus does have a complaint against the Church in Pergamum
- Or as the letter says, “*I have a few things against you*”
- In fact, there are two charges against the Christians who were part of the Church in Pergamum

- *“You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans”*
- So, some (not all) of the Christians thought that the teachings of Balaam were acceptable alongside their faith in the Lord Jesus
- This teaching, we are told, encouraged the eating of food offered as a sacrifice at the images of other gods...
- ...and, very importantly, fornication, that is permissive sex as part of temple worship – both of these practices were common in the worship of other gods at the time
- To make matters worse – and let’s be honest, they were already pretty bad – to make matters worse they not only indulged in these practices themselves but encourage others in the church to do the same
- We know this as the charge includes the mention of Balak, who in the Old Testament story attempted to lead the people of Israel, that is the people of God (like the Church) to sin
- Here some of the Christians in the Church of Pergamum were doing the same, not only was their thinking and actions corrupted but they were attempting to lead others into the same corruption
- The second charge, of holding to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, we know very little about
- But it is assumed that it was a similar teaching to that of Balaam and associated with permissive sex and adultery
- In short, some of the Christians in the Church in Pergamum were indulging the flesh, inappropriate eating and inappropriate sex – so not much changes!

- As part of the complaint, a warning is given. First a command is given, very simply, “*Repent then*”
- If they will not repent of these practices – both saying sorry for what has been done and turning away from those practices – if they do not then the Lord Jesus Himself will make war against them
- And this is some warning, the Lord Jesus will make war against them with the sword of His mouth
- Remember from last Sunday that the Lord Jesus gives Himself a Title at the beginning of the letter
- In this case, “*him who has the sharp two-edged sword*”, so Jesus has the right, the authority and the power to exercise what He says
- And the two-edged sword is an image, a reminder of the power of ruling authorities
- Ruling authorities have the power of life and death, one edge, but they also have the power to administer justice and mercy, the other edge
- The Christians in the Church in Pergamum had resisted the earthly ruling authorities, the Roman governors – the enemy from without
- But some of the Christians in the church had strayed from Jesus’ teachings and had become the enemy within, like a fifth column
- And in our reading from the Gospel this morning, Jesus said, “*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*”

- So, well done for resisting the Roman and other authorities (who can kill the body) but really you need to be afraid of me who has the authority to destroy both body and soul – some warning!

## **Promise**

- But as with our other letters, the Lord Jesus also offers a Promise to those that overcome, to those that conquer these problems
- *“To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it”*
- The hidden manna is most likely an allusion to the wedding banquet in heaven, the promise of eternal life
- Not the food sacrificed to idols in an earthly temple, an indulgence for the body...
- ...but spiritual food for the soul in the heavenly temple of the true and Almighty God
- The white stone with the unique name may be an allusion to small stones given to gladiators at the time, who having won a number of fights would be honoured with such a gift, a token of having conquered

## **Conclusion**

- We all sin and we must all repent, but some sin, especially thinking that is currently popular with the world, can lead others to sin
- At which point we become the enemy within, like a spy, like a fifth column, undermining with false, lazy or self-indulgent teaching

- Jesus gives us both a warning and a promise
- *“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”*
- Thanks be to God. **Amen**