

SEVEN: Pursuit of the Perfect Church

"PERGAMUM: LESSONS IN TRUTH"

REVELATION 2:12-17

This Week's Core Competency

Church – I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish his purposes on earth today. Ephesians 4:15, 16 *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

The letters to the seven churches were all written at the same time, the end of the first century, to congregations in the same region of the Roman world, Asia Minor. It comes as no surprise, then, that the Christians in them shared the same cultural milieu—in particular the same threat from the imperial cult. That threat was particularly great in Pergamum where Antipas was martyred. On Antipas and Christian suffering today one author writes, "Because Revelation mentions only the martyrdom of Antipas, probably few Christians had already been martyred when Revelation was being written. If the churches of Asia were like many of us, they may have been hoping and praying that Antipas would prove the final martyr. But Revelation warns that suffering is coming; the gospel always involves suffering (Mark 13:9-10; 2 Tim. 3:12). If we pray for the Lord's return we must also be ready to spread the gospel, a

Compromise with paganism brought ancient Israel defeat, and compromise with pagan values will do the same for us.

-Craig S. Keener

prerequisite for that return (Matt. 24:14; Rom. 11:25; cf. 2 Peter 3:9, 12, 15); yet with cutting-edge evangelism inevitably comes suffering (Matt. 10:16-39; Col. 1:23-24), right through the final generation (Rev. 6:9). Revelation prohibits us loving our lives more than his gospel; it summons us to follow the model of Antipas as faithful witnesses, no matter what the cost.

"As noted above, Jesus seems especially patient with and encouraging to a suffering church (2:8-11; 3:7-12), but having suffered does not automatically validate everything we do or believe. The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira, tolerating invitation to compromise, merited Jesus' rebuke. Yet their temptations were all too like the sorts of choices all Christians living in non-Christian societies must make. Once we move past the particulars of the situation in Pergamum and Thyatira, the principle of compromise can be expressed in innumerable situations."

That compromise can entail with the author calls "sanctifying the world's values. He goes on to say. As a religious 'prophet,' 'Balaam' probably sanctified the values of the culture by providing theological justifications for them, such as, 'Since an idol is really nothing, my worshipping it does no harm' (e.g., 1 Cor. 8:4). Like Balaam and Jezebel, we can sanctify worldly values by attributing them to God. During the Civil Rights Movement, the Bible and Christianity were exploited by Klan leader Sam Bower to justify violent Klan activity, while popular Baptist pastor Douglas Hudgins used them to ignore the segregation and violence being promoted even by members of his church. By contrast, the civil rights struggle revealed Christians committed

con't pg. 2

to stand against the values of their culture: Black activist Fannie Lou Hamer both forgave her white persecutors and stood for justice in Jesus' name, and white Mississippian Ed King shared in the suffering of his black colleagues, recognizing that 'if a person calls himself a Christian, he must give up everything and follow Christ'" (Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary: Revelation*, 129, 30).

Situation for Discussion

Sara has just accepted a position as a school administrator. Her peers expect her to join the AFSA and her superintendent expects her to actively take part in professional associations open to her. While she recognizes the value such affiliations might have for her career and isn't opposed in principle to involvement in either, she has some reservations. Being a member of the union involves paying dues, and rightly so. But she doesn't want her dues used to lobby for legislation she doesn't support or to promote positions on social issues that she doesn't agree with. On the other hand, her dues don't amount to much, and she can't expect to agree perfectly with any organization. She's convinced that actively participating in the professional organizations recommended by her superintendent would likewise involve similar tensions with secularism and send the wrong message.

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Revelation 2:12-17

12"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13I know where you live-where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-where Satan lives. 14Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. 15Likewise you also

have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 17He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Underline "double-edged sword" in v. 12 and "sword of my mouth" in v. 16.
- * Box "yet" indicating *contrast* in v. 13.
- * Circle "Satan" (2x) in v. 13.
- * Box "nevertheless" indicating *contrast* in v. 14.
- * Highlight "teaching of Balaam" in v. 14.
- * In the margin next to v. 14 write, "See Nu 22-25; 31:16."
- * Number the occurrences of "by" in v. 14.
- * Box "likewise" indicating *comparison* in v. 15.
- * Highlight "teaching of the Nicolaitans" in v. 15.
- * Box "otherwise" indicating *contrast* in v. 16.
- * Bracket "you" and "them" in v. 16.
- * Circle "hidden manna" in v. 17.
- * Circle "white stone" in v. 17.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Explain the relevance of the characteristics of Christ mentioned in verse 12 to the situation in the church in Pergamum.
2. "Satan has his throne" in Pergamum. What does that signify?
3. Explain the *contrast* introduced by "yet" in verse 13.
4. Being Christian in Pergamum was risky business. How so?
5. Who were Balaam and Balak? (See Nu 22-24)
6. What has the "teaching of Balaam" got to do with the church in Pergamum?
7. Eating food sacrificed to idols is viewed as "sin" in verse 14. Why do you think it's viewed differently by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8?
8. What do you infer about the "Nicolaitans" in verse 15 from their association with the "teaching of Balaam" in verse 14?
9. Explain the *contrast* in verse 16.
10. **Discussion:** Discuss the benefits afforded the one who overcomes.

day 3

EXAMINE – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

In seven messages to seven churches in Asia Minor, the Lord gives us a glimpse into what makes a church truly rich or truly poor. These letters while written to individual congregations at the end of the first century were intended to benefit all the churches. What's more they were intended to benefit the individuals that made up those churches and us too.

If you're a Christian thinking about moving to Pergamum, think again. It's where Satan is enthroned; it's his hometown. Christians who live there were expected to fulfill their civic duty by its citizens and to fulfill their religious duty by the state. These two duties had one thing in common, the imperial cult headquartered there. Because emperor worship was linked to civic loyalty and patriotism, those who refused it were considered godless and subversive—and Christians refused it. One author writes, "As being close to the centre of the enemy, Pergamum had been most exposed to danger from State persecution. Here, for the first time in the Seven Letters, this topic comes up. The suffering which had fallen to the lot of Smyrna proceeded chiefly from fellow-citizens, and, above all, from the Jews; but the persecution that fell to the lot of Pergamum is clearly distinguished from that kind of suffering. In Pergamum it took the form of suffering for the Name, when Christians were tried in the proconsular court, and confronted with the alternative of conforming to the State religion or receiving immediate sentence of death" (W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 297). Take the martyr, Antipas, for example, about whom we know nothing other than he lost his life because he refused to renounce his faith. He earned Christ's commendation as did those in the church who followed his example.

Too bad, in the midst of those who were determined to keep the faith there were the Nicolaitans who were all too willing to compromise theirs and teach others to do the same. They subscribed to the "teaching of Balaam" who betrayed the Israelites into a fatal compromise with the

Midianites. Numbers 25:1-3 tells what happened.

"While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. So Israel joined in worshiping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them." Balaam's advice to the Moabites ultimately resulted in the Israelites' demise (Nu 31:16) just as the Nicolaitans' advice would ultimately result in the demise of the church if it continued to tolerate it. They advised compromise. Maybe they argued that participation in the imperial cult wasn't idolatry because Christians knew that the emperor was no god and that participation in guild banquets wasn't idolatry because most Romans viewed them as social rather than religious events. In any case, whatever their logic, it stands condemned by Christ. "Compromise with the imperial cult to save one's life and compromise with the pagan activities of trade guilds to save one's livelihood are all of one piece (cf. 13:17); they represent accommodation to the world at the expense of one's total devotion to God's standards" (Keener, 125). The church's only option is to repent, to reject the Nicolaitan heresy or Christ will visit his church and pronounce judgment on them. Those who overcome are promised "hidden manna" and a "white stone with a new name written on it" suggesting that Christ will sustain them and grant them entrance into the blessings of the future age.

Although we face nothing in our secular Western world identical to what Christians in Pergamum faced in their religious Roman world, we are tempted to compromise and conform in ours like they were in theirs. "We do have a secular society that places a great deal of pressure on Christians to compromise and conform (cf. 1 Pet. 4:3-4), and a syncretism similar to that faced by the Christians in Pergamum is taking over Christianity with its rampant materialism. On the whole it is hard to tell the Christians from the non-Christians by their lifestyle and attitudes" (Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT, 150).

The Message of the Passage

Resist the temptation to compromise your faith and accommodate your lifestyle in order to get along in our secular world; instead, remain faithful to Christ.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you through his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James suggests in James 1:22. Try some of the challenges below to apply what you have learned this week.

- **Give Yourself Some Good Advice Based on the Message of this Passage.**

- **Pick a verse or verses from the passage to memorize or think about this week.**

- **Relate the message of this passage to any of the following:**
 - **Belonging**
 - **Becoming**
 - **going Beyond**

- **Journal your thoughts on the passage.**

- **Home Group Discussion** (for those involved in the deeper connections of a home group)

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Christians used to use the term "worldly" to refer to others who compromised their faith and accommodated their lifestyle to get along in the "world." We don't use that term as much anymore but the dangers implied by it are still real. Talk about the temptations to "worldliness" that you experience as contemporary Christians.

“Pergamum: Lessons in Truth”
(Use the space below for Sunday's message notes)

notes **N** STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 12 **Pergamum** "Pergamum was never important until it became the capital of the independent kingdom of the Attalids after Alexander the Great. Its last king willed it to Rome in 133 BC, when it apparently became the capital of the Roman province of Asia. About 15 miles inland, it did not have a good trading position. But, apart from its administrative importance, it was significant for its great library, said to have contained more than 200,000 parchment scrolls. Indeed, our word 'parchment' is derived from this name 'Pergamum'. It was an important religious center. People came from all over the world to be healed by the god Asclepius [symbolized by a serpent], and Pergamum has been described as 'the Lourdes of the ancient world'. Zeus, Dionysos and Athene also had notable temples in the city. Pergamum was a centre of Caesar-worship, and it had a temple dedicated to Rome as early as 29 BC. It attained the coveted title *neokoros*, 'Temple-sweeper', before either Smyrna or Ephesus, and took its devotion to emperor-worship seriously. In due course it added a second and third temple in honour of the emperor. It was the principal centre of the imperial cult in this part of the world. But emperor-worship was not its sole religious activity. Behind the city was a great conical hill, the site of a multitude of heathen temples" (Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., TNTC, 65). "Christians were persecuted in Pergamum due primarily to the prevailing imperial cult rather than popular cults like Asklepios. Emperor worship was linked to civic loyalty and patriotism. Thus refusal to participate was not only godless but subversive. Christians, due to their rejection of the Roman gods, were called atheists; but they were also accused of 'hatred of the human race' because they refused to show political loyalty to the emperor and thus to the Roman people" (Osborne, 138, 39).

v. 12 **sword** "In the context of life in a provincial capital where the proconsul was granted the 'right of the sword' (*ius gladii*), the power to execute at will, the sovereign Christ was the two-edged sword would remind the threatened congregation that ultimate power over life and death belongs to God" (Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, 97). "The 'sharp double-edged sword' was a symbol of Roman justice. As mentioned in 1:16, this symbol is drawn from Isa. 11:4 and the picture of divine justice there. It is linked with Rev. 2:16 here and thus not only to 1:16 but also to 19:15, 21, with the imagery of the sword of justice 'coming out of Christ's mouth,' referring to his word of judgment" (Osborne, 140).

v. 13 **Satan . . . throne** Or "where Satan is enthroned" (141, n. 4), i.e., where Satan actively rules. "The expression 'throne of Satan' refers primarily to the emperor-cult as enforced from Pergamum at a time of critical confrontation for the church. We note the strong hints of the growth of a 'polemical parallelism' between Christ and Caesar. The claims of Caesar are viewed by John as a Satanic parody of those of Christ. And some of the imagery of the later chapters may rightly be seen to refer to Rome as a persecuting power and so to reinforce our picture" (Hemer, 87; cf. Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 457, 58).

v. 14 **Balaam** Cf. Nu 22:1-25:3; 31:16. "It is clear from the context that this reference is not to a body of doctrine, but to Balaam's activity of advising the Midianite women how to beguile the Israelites into acting treacherously against the Lord. Numbers 25:1 ff reports that the Israelites 'began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab,' who in turn were successful in getting them to worship their gods and take part in their sacred meals. Although there is no mention of Balaam at this point, we learn in Numbers 31:16 of his role in Israel's apostasy. Blaiklock notes that Balaam's clever notion was to break down Israel's power by an indirect attack on their morale. 'Pagan food and pagan women were his powerful tools against the rigidity of the Mosaic Law' (p. 39). Thus Balaam became a prototype of all corrupt teachers who betrayed believers into fatal compromise with worldly ideologies" (Mounce, 97, 98 italics added; see also Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, 87-94).

v. 15 **Nicolaitans** I.e., "the teaching of Balaam," which involved "eating food sacrificed to idols" and "committing sexual immorality" (vv. 14, 20; cf. Ac 15:29). "Apparently this cult movement sought accommodation with such pagan practices. The primary aspect was idolatry. The heretics were apparently teaching that there was nothing wrong with participating in the imperial cult, since even most Romans did it out of civic duty rather than actual worship" (Osborne, 144).

v. 17 **hidden manna** The meaning of this term is obscure. Osborne gives five proposed interpretations. God gave the Israelites visible bread, i.e., manna, to sustain them in the wilderness. Here he promises to sustain the one who overcomes by giving him "hidden" manna. "As they 'overcome' both the pressure of the imperial cult and the false teachers in their midst, the believers will be given spiritual food now as a foretaste of the heavenly manna at the eschaton" [i.e., future age] (Osborne, 148).

v. 17 **white stone** The meaning of this term is even more obscure. Osborne gives seven proposed interpretations. A stone or *tessera* was given to the victor at games for admission to a banquet. Here God promises to admit the one who overcomes to the messianic banquet in the eschaton (Osborne, 149).

v. 17 **new name** Either "Christ" or a new name given the holder of the stone. "In either case, it means certainty of entrance to the messianic banquet" (George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 49).

Connect the **FAMILY**. During this series, Bible stories appropriate for children will be used that complement the adult teaching.

Experience it!

Experience scripture through the activity-based learning exercise. Dinner is a perfect time to engage the family.

If you can't see God and may never hear Him talk out loud, then how are you supposed to know him? Read Acts 4:23-35. Peter, John and all their friends were talking to God like he was in the room with them. They had gotten to know him through the scripture. You get to know God better when you read the Bible (and do your Scrolls!).



Pray it!

Pray God's will for your child by praying scriptures. Insert your child's name in the blanks as you pray.

Father, I pray _____ will not be arrogant or put his hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but he will put his hope in You, who richly provides him with everything for his enjoyment. 1Ti 6:17

Post it!

Post the kid-friendly Core Competency and the memory verse throughout the house. Lead your children to interact with them as they memorize.

Church – I believe God uses the people in the church to do His work.

Memory verse – "Now you are the body of Christ (the church), and each one of you is a part of it." 1Co 12:27

Discuss it!

Discover biblical truth by discussing the scripture. Reflective questions are great with older kids.

- *How did Peter, John and the other believers know it was God who had made the heavens, earth and the sea?
- *Where did the believers get the words they used in their prayer?
- *What did the believers speak about with great boldness?

Live it!

Live out the Core Competency and build deeper relationships by doing this activity.

Has your family filled the Crisis Pregnancy Center Baby Bottle with very much change yet? A few coins don't seem like much, but a baby bottle full of coins starts adding up. Can you imagine how much money is collected when 100 families fill their bottles with change? The church works best when everyone does their part!



Challenge

Kids preschool through sixth grade receive Kid Pix Tokens for each discipleship activity completed.

Family completes **Experience It** _____ Child memorizes kid-friendly **Core Competency** _____

Family participates in **Live It** _____ Child memorizes **Memory Verse** _____

Kids can earn extra tokens on Sunday morning by:

Bringing a friend to **The Kid Connection** _____ Completing **KIDZ Bulletin** _____

Child's name _____ Parent's signature _____

30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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Keith Smith (B.A. in Speech Communication, Texas Tech University and M.A. in Religious Education, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the Family and Children's Pastor at Pantego Bible Church. Keith is a featured communicator for Song of Solomon for Students and speaks at children/student camps across the country. He has developed a number of relational parenting seminars designed to motivate parents to empower their parenting by emotionally connecting with their kids. Keith lives with his wife, Denise, and their two children, Jordan and Alex.



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The mission of THE SCROLLS is to help you develop the beliefs, practices, and virtues of a follower of Jesus Christ called The 30 Core Competencies through your own active reading of the Bible. Send any questions or comments you may have about this lesson to Tom Bulick. His e-mail address is tbulick@pantego.org.