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Sermon Series: *Lenten Letters*, No. 9

Faith and Persecution (Pergamum)

April 19, 2020 (video)

Revelation 2:12-17

Throughout the season of Lent this year, I'd planned to work through Jesus' letters to the seven churches of Revelation, since both the season of Lent and at least most of these letters of Revelation share the common theme of repentance.

Well, as you know, with the Covid thing, on the first Sunday that we met online like this, I skipped over the church that I'd planned for that Sunday. With all that was going on in that moment, it seemed like the thing to do.

But today, it seems like the thing to do to return to that missing letter in order to close out the series.

It's Revelation, Chapter 2, beginning at verse 12 – Jesus' letter to the church at Pergamum. Let me read that passage for us.

Jesus says to the Apostle John:

To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³ I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

¹⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

Like most of the letters, we notice that Jesus' assessment of the church at Pergamum was mixed – which, even as I wrote those words earlier this week, it made me wonder, "What would Jesus' assessment be of us were He to write a letter today?"

Have you thought about that?

I know we've all had lots to think about through these last weeks, but it is worth considering: what would Jesus write to the church at Wilmore?

And of course, since the church is not just the leadership but instead the whole of the body, it's worth us all asking, both individually and corporately, "Jesus, write a letter to me – write a letter to us."

We do that, of course, every time we honestly give Him a voice in our lives. Whenever we'll quiet ourselves enough for Him to speak – whenever we'll turn off the noise in our lives and open ourselves to His honest assessment – that's really what He'll do: by the voice of His Spirit, He'll speak a letter, just like this, to us.

That's the purpose and the beauty of the Holy Spirit in our midst, you see? Jesus wants to communicate with His people, and He'll willingly tell us the truth about ourselves.

He'll write us a letter like this, if only we'll give Him our attention.

Undoubtedly, He had the attention of the believers at Pergamum – if at no other time, at least when he gets to verse 14, where He says, "***But I have a few complaints against you.***"

Can you imagine hearing that from Jesus?

Of course, there will always be people in our lives who disagree with us – and who hold things against us. If you're a person of principle, that can hardly be avoided.

But one thing we don't ever want to discover in some backhanded way is that Jesus has something against us, which is why it's so important to spend time with Him – reading and learning His word – listening to Him in prayer.

We don't want to be surprised by a letter like this – calling for repentance of things that have been going on in our lives for years, maybe decades.

In Pergamum's case, Jesus mentions two sinful behaviors. First, some there were participating in the worship of other gods. That's really what's behind the "eating food sacrificed to idols" language, nearly everywhere you see it in Scripture. It was so bad because Jesus sees it as nothing less than committing spiritual adultery against God.

And the second sin mentioned is how others – another group there, though they were not necessarily practicing this spiritual adultery themselves, were tolerating it in others.

They did not resist it.

They did not call to account those who were involved in it.

They either looked the other way neglecting it, or even worse, they encouraged it.

You see, we learn – not so much here but in other places – that this was the stance of the Nicolaitans, a group that Jesus mentions several times here. They publicly affirmed this sort of spiritual pluralism – that in order to get along, you go along, even with the worship of other gods. So evidently there was a group at Pergamum who said this was all just fine.

Yet Jesus says it's not, and He calls them to repent of this spiritual adultery – this business of saying you love God yet giving yourself in worship and service to other gods. That's simply not an option for a follower of Christ, you see? You're either following Him alone – or you're not really following Him at all.

That's why Jesus calls the church at Pergamum to repentance. He calls them to choose His way and then to walk in it.

And yet, not all was lost at Pergamum. There were some who stood for Jesus even in to the point of martyrdom.

You see, Pergamum was the capital of the Roman province of Asia in that day, which meant it was where the governor ruled, and that made it very Roman in its ways and moods and values. And that influence only heightened the contrast that always exists between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of our world. There was lots of pressure at Pergamum to conform to Roman standards and ways, which made faithfully following Christ harder there than in places where less Roman influence existed.

That's still very much the case today, of course, and it's one reason Christians are called to pray especially for those in governmental leadership positions. Because of the environment and the very real spiritual warfare involved, it is harder to be a faithful Christian in Washington, D.C., than it is out in the country somewhere in rural Virginia.

It's harder to be a faithful follower of Jesus in Frankfort, Kentucky, than it is to follow Christ in Nonesuch, Kentucky. There are both earthly and spiritual things about all earthly governments that pull people in and try to twist their thinking and their values and priorities.

And it was his resistance to just this sort of pressure that cost this fellow, Antipas, his life. We don't know the details, but for his refusal to go along to get along with earthly government in some way, he was killed.

In the apocalyptic book that is Revelation, it's strange that Antipas is the only named martyr. Yet Jesus holds him up as an example just the same, and he serves as a poignant reminder to us today that there is danger – spiritual and otherwise – in blindly following any earthly government.

Now, that's not to say we're never to follow the guidance of government. Scripture is very clear that government is ordained of God for the good of people. We live in a sinful world, and, until Jesus returns to rule here, some authority structure is necessary to preserve us from chaos.

But in those places where God's governance and human governance collide, that's where we need to take a stand, as Antipas did – even if the price is life itself.

And determining those places requires true spiritual wisdom and discernment.

Let me bring this issue into our world today.

There are things that government is doing in the midst of this Covid virus that are good and Scriptural – like trying to preserve life.

There are also things that government is doing that are not good and Scriptural, like plunging our nation deeper and deeper into debt.

There are also things the government is doing that we don't yet know to be good or not good. There are lots of suppositions and theories floating around, to be sure. Lots of talking heads with opinions, but I'm not sure anyone really knows definitively the good and the not good.

In response to some of it, there are some Christians saying that the church is being persecuted in not being allowed to meet in large gatherings.

Personally, I reject that, and, you know, I think Antipas would too. I'll tell you why.

But before I do, let me say that both the Bible and the founders of our nation affirm that blindly following earthly

government is not spiritually wise, and that's because of their recognition of how corruptible human government can be. Both Scripture and our own national founders would say we're wise to ask questions. We're wise to get informed. We're wise to think critically about all that's going on in our national life.

Because governments can so readily fall under the influence of sinful humanity, individuals must be informed and engaged enough to keep governments in check wherever that's possible.

And, if governments today were including only churches in their restrictions about meeting together, then I'd say there certainly is a Christian persecution problem.

But, when the same thing is happening to all other religions – when Muslims can't meet in their mosques; when Jews can't meet in their synagogues; when neither Hindus nor Buddhists nor anyone else can meet in their places of worship – then I'm not prepared to suggest that what's happening is Christian persecution.

Maybe you're not yet convinced.

Well, consider: those faiths – those religions I just mentioned – aren't even the biggest religions of our day, of course.

The thing that tells me that it is not Christian persecution that's going on is that the very biggest religion in our nation is not permitted to meet together either, you see – which is, of course, the religion of sports.

If crowds were allowed to gather for football or basketball or baseball games – or Nascar or horse races – but not for the worship of the One, real God, *then* I'd certainly call that persecution for the sake of Jesus.

But that's not what's happening, and until then, no Christian should be saying we're suffering persecution for Jesus.

Now, should we be asking questions of our government? Certainly. We should support what's good. We should be informed. We should think critically and engage with other people and pray for those in leadership. We're called, as followers of Christ, to all those things.

But let's not fall into the trap of calling "not-persecution" persecution. Doing that takes away from the magnitude of the kind of conviction Antipas died for – and the kind of conviction that you and I may well, one day, have to fight and die for ourselves.

And besides that, calling non-persecution persecution is an easy way out of not really taking the time to think through these sorts of things and to listen for Jesus to talk to us about what He would have us do.

Because you see, whether or not we live in a capital city, Pergamum is still a lot like our modern culture today.

Like Pergamum, our world is full of information and wonders and theories and philosophies.

We can take on all sorts of different intellectual pursuits.

In our American democratic system, there is a pluralism of ideas and values, so whether we live in Washington or Frankfort or Wilmore or Nonesuch, we all experience calls to stop, look and listen from all directions.

And so how do you survive a world like ours – a world where there is temptation for distraction everywhere?

There's only one way, really, and that's what Jesus is telling us here: we have to develop a greater sensitivity to His voice—His word. We have to, very intentionally, pay more and more attention to the one, as Jesus introduces Himself here, who comes with “the sharp two-edged sword.”

That is the word of God, you see?

The sword of God's word is the only offensive weapon available to the follower of Jesus, which means that the only way to successfully resist the ungodly ways of the world around us is to engage the word of God. That is to learn and know and hold fast to sound theology; to feed our minds on the things that are good and right and godly—on that which is true and pure and lovely and admirable and excellent and praiseworthy, as the apostle Paul puts it in Philippians, Chapter 4.

You engage a thought world successfully only by thinking. We can't do it by escaping or by burying ourselves in emotion or noise or busy-ness or false assertions that sound spiritual but really are not.

Jesus says, “You want to survive challenging times? Then invest your time in learning what God's will is—what God's truth is.”

And there's no short cut to that. We can't get it from the news. We have to get it from Jesus—just like those Christians at Pergamum. We have to listen to Him.

And frankly, in this semi-quarantine situation, many of us have been given an extraordinary opportunity to do that more—with more intentionality. If only we will.

If we gave as much time to listening to Jesus as we give to listening to the news, or worrying, or complaining, or

simply entertaining ourselves, I wonder what all He could do through His church in these strange days?

Let's find out, huh?

Let's not take the easy road of blindly following a crowd one way or another. Let's exercise our faith in Christ by learning His word, by learning His will and walking in His way. That's the road of faith—always, but especially so in difficult times.

Father, give us all a unique wisdom for navigating these days, that, for your glory, we might always be good citizens, good followers, good leaders and good and faith-filled disciples. Amen.

Benediction:

Friends, with the Lord as our guide, we can know that, regardless of present circumstance, He is always leading us to somewhere that is truly good. He's not just the shepherd—He's the good shepherd, who leads His flock right where they need to be so they might know the very best.

In all of what's going on in our world—in the midst of it all—God is present; He's active; He's engaged; and He's taking all who will follow Him somewhere good—somewhere that's better, deeper, more informed, more substantial—higher than where we've been in the past.

Now more than ever friends, follow the Lord. Be strong, take heart and follow the Lord.