

Lessons from the Lamps: Battle for the Mind

Revelation 2:12-17

May 31, 2015

Dan Hoffman

~The sword-tongued Jesus challenges mind-slipping Christians to win the battle for our thoughts~

[Pray]

If you've been with us over the last few weeks you know that we are in the middle of a series looking at Jesus' letters to the churches of Revelation, and the letter we are looking at today was addressed to the church in Pergamum. So please open your Bibles to Revelation chapter 2 starting in verse 12.

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Let's begin with a word to the context we have covered to date.

John was in his 80's when he wrote this, and imprisoned on the island of Patmos. The Emperor had required that everyone throw a pinch of incense on his alter and say *Kaisaras einai o Kurios* – "Caesar is Lord." But John couldn't say it because for him there was only one Lord, and so Domitian imprisoned him.

But while John was separated from the church he remained connected by writing and it was during this time he penned 1st, 2nd and 3rd John and his Gospel. But no letter was as important as the one we are reading now. And that's because John is only the scribe of Revelation – it was Jesus who spoke these words.

One Sunday John heard someone speaking behind him and turned to see Jesus Christ standing among 7 golden lampstands – a picture of the 7 churches of Asia, and really all churches of all time. And Jesus was among His churches. In spite of their imperfection He wasn't standing above them in judgment, He wasn't standing away from them disinterested. Jesus is standing among His lampstands, He is hands-on involved and taking care of His bride.

And the Jesus John saw was amazing! In chapter 1 he says:

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And... among the lampstands was someone like a son of man.... The hair on His head was white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes were like blazing fire.... In His right hand He held seven stars, and coming out of His mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. (Revelation 1:12-16)

It is this Jesus that speaks the words we read today – words originally intended for the church of Pergamum, but words that also speak into our situation.

And so today we see: **The sword-tongued Jesus challenge mind-slipping Christians to win the battle for our thoughts.**

Look with me at verse 12.

[Read Revelation 2:12]

Now as we have already seen Jesus presents Himself differently to every one of the 7 churches using a piece of the initial revelation from chapter 1. So in Ephesus Jesus was “the One holding the 7 stars in His hand.” In Smyrna Jesus was the First and the Last, the one who died and came to life again.” And now in Pergamum Jesus is the One who “has the sharp, double-edged sword.”

So why does Jesus hold a sword while talking to Pergamum?

Actually there are a couple reasons: First the symbol of Pergamum was the sword – the city was “one of only a few... to which Rome had given ‘the right of the sword,’ the power to inflict capital punishment.”¹

But the main reason Jesus, the Prince of Peace, appears here as the one with the double-edged sword is because the church of Pergamum was living in the middle of an intense battle for their minds.

In this battle it wasn’t men that were the soldiers but ideas. And the battle for the mind in Pergamum had two main fronts. The church was being bombarded both directly by the world outside and covertly, by the world that had snuck inside.

And as is often the case, the church was doing well on the first front and poorly on the second. The attacks that came from outside were obvious enough to be rejected, but the attacks from within were subtle. And it was those that the church of Pergamum had fallen prey to.

But there is good news. Jesus was there, standing among His churches, and He knew what was going on, and hadn’t given up on them. Look at verse 13.

[Read Revelation 2:13]

The church of Pergamum was behind enemy lines in a city Jesus calls the home of Satan! And that’s quite a statement! I don’t think the city counsel would have approved it as a slogan, but as we have seen before Jesus isn’t interested in being politically correct – He speaks truth because it sets people free.²

So what was Jesus getting at by calling Pergamum home of Satan?

Well it turns out there were three major components in Pergamum which acted as hotbeds for Satan’s influence. The first was an intellectual one.

¹ Gerhard Krodel “Revelation:” (Minnesota: Augsburg Press), 1989. pg 116.

² John 8:32

Pergamum was an educated city with one of the largest libraries around – it was home to over 200,000 parchment scrolls.³ In fact the word “parchment” derives from the name “Pergamum.” And Pergamum prided itself in this.

Now there is nothing wrong with education, but sometimes education can lead to an attitude of having everything figured out. And Satan inspires this attitude.

Earlier this week I was listening to the CBC and a scientist named Nancy Abrams was explaining how she used to be an atheist but now believes in god. And she wrote a book titled “A God that could be real.” I was intrigued.

But as Nancy explained her position it became clear to me that she was just attempting to reason her way into having her cake and eating it too. She needed to believe in a god because she had been through the 12 step program and had to call on a higher power, but she didn’t want to believe in the God of the Bible.

So her answer was to come up with a god the scientific community could accept. And so she ruled out all the un-scientific aspects to God like that He is eternal, or created the universe from nothing, or is all knowing, or able to break the laws of science, and instead hypothesized a god that evolved along with the rest of us – just some super being.

Now after about 5 minutes I was going to barf so I had to turn it off, but I looked it up online later and was blown away by the positive comments. People said things like: “Brilliant, I want to hear more. Buying the book for sure!”⁴

The fact is that people today, just like in first century Pergamum, love to imagine they can figure God out, and when they intellectually come up with a way to do this others jump on board and Satan smiles.

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The second satanically influenced field in Pergamum was the political one. Like Smyrna, Pergamum was an intensely patriotic city. As early as 29AD the city built the first temple in worship of Caesar Augustus.⁵

Now the thing with emperor worship was that it was closely tied to the political identity of the people. To be Roman was a huge deal. Remember this is the nation that was literally taking over the world. So citizenship in Rome was incredibly prestigious. And if you weren’t born a citizen you would dedicate your life to buying it because citizenship was everything.⁶

³ Charles Barklay in Darrell Johnson’s “Discipleship on the Edge” (Vancouver, Regent Press), 2004. pg 77

⁴ <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/what-am-i-doing-with-my-life-1.3082096/a-god-that-could-be-real-1.3082308>

⁵ Johnson, 78.

⁶ Acts 22:28

The problem was that to be pro-Roman was to be anti-Christian. And this caused serious problems for the early converts and Satan smiled.

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The third satanically influenced field was a religious one. Right behind the city was a huge hill that stood about a thousand feet high. And enthroned on top this hill was a whole host of temples to the various gods of Rome.

And one of the big temples honoured the god Asklepios – the god of healing. And Asklepios' symbol was a serpent. So people would go to the temple for healing and spend the night sleeping on the floor. And during the night the priests would release a whole bunch of tame snakes who would slither all over the place. Then the belief was that if one of these snakes touched you it was actually Asklepios touching you and you would be healed.⁷

Now this should set off an alarm. In the Scriptures Satan, the father of lies, is often depicted as a snake. And the Christians in Pergamum literally lived under the shadow of this temple. So intellectually and politically and religiously Satan held influence in this city.

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Now you might think I've gone a little overboard with the words "satanically influenced", but I don't use them lightly. I use them because even though it isn't popular today to believe in a personal devil Jesus did, and attributed everything anti-Christ in this world to his influence even calling him the "ruler of this world."⁸ Now this doesn't mean every time we sin Satan is involved, we are pretty capable on our own.

But Jesus said the church of Pergamum lived under Satan's influence and yet verse 13 says they were standing strong – that's good... but not spectacular.

You see external pressures, while sometimes brutal – even to the point of murder – are pretty easy to spot. That's why it takes more than some lady writing a book about a god she created to cause us to throw in the towel. But there is a much more subtle danger out there. Look at verse 14.

[Read Revelation 2:14-16]

Jesus says it is possible for a church to strongly resist pressures from outside while at the same time carelessly flirting with others within. And when this happens Jesus takes up His sword and calls us to repent. So where had this church slipped? How were they losing the battle for their minds so badly that Jesus had drawn His sword against them? The battle they were losing was one of choosing tolerance over truth. And this is a battle Canadians know well.

⁷ Barklay in Johnson, 78.

⁸ John 8:31

But surprisingly for us the scriptures do not present tolerance as virtue at all. The Bible calls for the acceptance of people from every race and gender and demographic. And it upholds virtues like patience and mercy and civility and kindness, and humility and understanding. But it does not uphold the tolerance of all ideas.

And that's because when Jesus calls us to Himself His call is always to "repent" – to forsake everything we were previously pursuing, and turn towards Him. And the only ideas that are welcome to Jesus are those that elevate Him as Lord and cause us to live our lives to His glory and the expanse of His kingdom.

And Jesus is unapologetic about this. He says if you are going to come to Me for salvation then you are going to make Me God in your life or I will have nothing to do with you at all. Jesus isn't interested in sharing the throne of your heart. He will have all of you, or He won't have you at all.

This is why in Romans Paul says:

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2)

As Jesus' followers we are called not to tolerate the world's ideas, but to turn away from them and allow God to remold our minds from within.

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So why does Jesus hate the false ideas of the world?

He hates them because they hold people in bondage. Like the woman on the radio who has convinced herself that because she can't understand the God of the Bible He must not exist. The problem is Nancy Abrams was created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, but now she has trapped herself in a way of thinking that is leading her towards destruction. And Jesus says the father lies is behind this, and He hates it when people give themselves over to Satan's influence and so destroy the temple He created them to be.

In contrast to the bondage of lies Jesus says:

If you hold to My teaching... then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. (John 8:31-32)

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Now notice in verse 14 that the whole church had not fallen into believing lies. It was only some who held to false teaching. But in verse 16 Jesus says the whole church needs to repent for not holding them back.

Friends, if you are a Christian and part of this church, then what you believe about Jesus is our responsibility. We are accountable for each other. And the good part of this is that the church can actually save us from Jesus' sword. That's what Jesus says. As a side note we can't do this, we can't hold you accountable, unless you become part of the church – we call this membership.

Now for some of you this idea raises the hair on your neck because you've been hurt by the church before. But ask yourself what is scarier – facing the sword of Jesus' mouth or standing with the body Jesus designed to keep you? Yes there are problems here and everywhere else, but we have no choice. So if you aren't a member yet I encourage you stop being afraid of the problems and become part of the solution. Join the church.

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Alright back to Pergamum; the label John puts on what was infiltrating the church was the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

Now we don't know much about these groups, but what we do know is that Balaam is Hebrew and made up of two words: *Baal* which means conqueror and was the name of a Canaanite god, and *am* which means people – conqueror of the people. And the name Nicolaitan is a Greek word made up of *nike* which means conqueror and *laos* which means people⁹ - conqueror of the people.

And so because of the similarity between these names many theologians believe these two groups were actually one which sought to conquer the minds of the people in Pergamum by their teaching.

Now what were they teaching? Among other things, verse 14 mentions eating meat that had been scarified to idols and to engaging in sex outside the biblical description of marriage – one man and one woman in a life-long relationship. And the rest of the New Testament tells us that both these issues were big problems for the early Christians. So what was going on?

In that day people would bring an animal to the temple of their god. Some of the animal would be given as a sacrifice, and the rest would be used to hold a feast in honour of that god. And this was a major cultural connecting point.

But when people became Christians they found themselves in a really strange place. When their family members and friends who had not yet come to Christ would hold a feast they would be invited. But should they go? If yes, they were seen as honouring the false god, if no they were seen as piously rejecting their family and friends.

And the Balaamite-Nicolaitans were saying, let's not lose our connection to our neighbours. And besides idols are nothing, and no food is unclean, it says so in the Bible. So don't worry about it. It's a convincing argument isn't it?

But, while there was some truth to what they were saying there was also some error. You see in Middle-Eastern culture to eat with someone means to form a bond with them. And at these feasts the honoured god was assumed to be a

⁹ Johnson, 80

guest. And while the Bible says idols themselves are nothing¹⁰ there is a spiritual world behind the physical that is something. This is why Paul says:

The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too.
 (1 Corinthians 10:20-21)

So what they were doing was pledging themselves to Jesus, but at the same time joining themselves to demons when it was convenient or beneficial.

So how does this relate to us? If you have joined yourself with Jesus and if you eat at His table, ask yourself am I wrapped up in any idolatry? Now we don't worship carved images anymore, but ask yourself where do I find my self-worth? What makes me who I am? Is it something you do? Are you a business person or an engineer or a doctor – is that your identity? Or is it found in something you do for God? Are you a Sunday school teacher or a deacon or a pastor?

No matter how noble, if your worth comes from something other than being God's temple, created to worship Him and enjoy Him forever, then you've fallen prey to idolatry. The gods we worship give us worth, so beware the subtle invitation to Satan's table.

...
 In Pergamum sexuality was the second issue. Now today we live in a hyper-sexualized culture where everything from deodorant to cars gets covered by a picture of a scantily clad woman – are you living in the world I'm living in? But Rome was pretty similar. One first century writer said "We have prostitutes for the sake of pleasure; we have concubines for the sake of daily cohabitation; [and] we have wives for the purpose of having children legitimately."¹¹ That's pretty brazen!

And in contrast the chastity Christians were called to was a brand new idea. So you can imagine how hard it was for Christians to come out of that... So why does Jesus restrict sex to marriage? Does He just want to ruin our fun?

...
 In a word "no". Jesus loves sex – I hope this doesn't surprise you. He created us as sexual beings. But He is down on sex outside marriage not because it is too much fun, but because it destroys our humanity. Here's what I mean.

In the first century, like today, the belief was that our bodies aren't sacred so what we do with them doesn't really matter. Ultimately we are going to leave them behind anyway, so as long as we aren't hurting anyone it doesn't matter what we do. Pretty contemporary right?

¹⁰ See 1 Corinthians 10:20

¹¹ Demosthenes, quoted in Johnson, pg 81.

But the problem with this is that people aren't souls inside bodies. You don't have a body, you are a body. Your body isn't the home of the real you, your body is the real you. And the Bible says two things about our bodies.

First they are the temple of the Holy Spirit.¹² Our bodies are the place where the worship of the God of the universe happens – and this is what it means to be human – uniquely in creation we image God. And second, when you have sex with someone the Bible says you join yourself to them – you become one person with them.¹³ And sex outside marriage puts these two things in conflict.

See while our culture says casual sex can be nothing personal, in reality you can't go to bed with someone and leave your soul parked outside because you aren't a body with a soul; your body and your soul are connected.

And so casual sex with multiple people actually destroys our humanity. Instead of our bodies being set apart for God's worship we join them together in an animal act of selfishness and end up becoming less than human – we become something we were not created to be.

And so Jesus calls the church to repent. He says stop finding your identity in idols, stop tearing My temple apart with your sexually. And stop tolerating this in your church!

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Now here we have to say something about judgment. When we encounter people who have not yet pledged themselves to follow Jesus our job is not to judge them. Sinners came to Jesus all the time and He accepted them. It is only after encountering Jesus that sinners are transformed into saints. So stop being judgmental of others. But at the same time be ruthless with sin in your own life – weed it out. And if there is a Christian you love who is struggling with sin don't leave them there, help them weed it out too. Save them from Jesus' sword.

Now the balance here isn't easy, but this is what Jesus wants the church to do.

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Finally Jesus concludes with a promise. If we overcome, then we will experience the abundant life He has for us. Look at verse 17.

[Read Revelation 2:17]

Jesus makes two promises to churches who overcome and turn away from prostituting themselves to idols or sex and make Him the God in their life. Jesus says He will give them manna and a white stone with a new name.

¹² 1 Corinthians 6:19

¹³ Genesis 2:24

Now the meat of both these promises is the same – this is where abundant life is. While it appears that following Jesus means giving up what brings us happiness, in reality when we live the way we were created to live we find true happiness.

So when Israel was in the desert and cried out to God – which is what they were supposed to do – He fed them. They could have starved but He satisfied their bellies. And Jesus does the same. When we come to Him we find that He says:
 I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty. (John 6:35)

So don't rob yourself; don't fill your body with the promises of pathetic gods who won't satisfy and actually want to destroy you. Instead come to Jesus to feast. He is the True Bread so if you want to really live, go to Him.

And second Jesus says if you overcome He will give you a stone with a new name written on it that only you know.

Now we aren't certain what this means, but the commentary I was looking at suggested that it could refer to a first century practice called *tessara hospitalis*:

When best friends were about to part they would take a stone and write their pet names for each other on it. And then they would break the stone in half giving the part with their own name to the other. And since the stone would last forever their friendship would also endure the separation.¹⁴

And so Jesus promises intimate friendship to those who endure. He will write our new name on a stone and keep it giving us one with His own personal name inscribed. And to know someone's name is to know them intimately.

It's like how many people call me "pastor", and my friends call be Dan, and my mom calls me Daniel, but Nikki and I have special names for each other that I won't share, they are ours and they're intimate.

And Jesus says if you make Me your God I will give Myself to you. You will know Me face to face.¹⁵

So brothers and sisters there is a battle raging for your minds, let's win it. Let's not allow any idol, no matter how good, to become the source of our identity, and let's not be taken in by the lie that what we do with our bodies doesn't matter – the sword-tongued Jesus says it does. Instead let's make Him God and become what we were created to be – human, made in His image for His glory.

¹⁴ Johnson, pg 86

¹⁵ See 1 Corinthians 13:12