“REPENT THEREFORE!”

Revelation 2:12–29

Key Verse: 2:16

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

The famous pastor A.W. Tozer once said, “We are not diplomats but prophets, and our message is not a compromise but an ultimatum.” That’s not a popular way of thinking, giving people ultimatums. But it kind of fits with our passage today. We’re studying a unique place in the Bible where Jesus actually sends messages to some churches. And they’re not just odd old churches with archaic issues; Jesus’ messages to them are really applicable to all churches (2:23b). Today Jesus calls two churches to repent of their compromise with certain people among them. As a church, don’t we want to be a loving, accepting place? Don’t we want to accommodate all kinds of people? Being confrontational makes most of us cringe. Today we want to think about what compromise is in a believer’s life and in a believing community, and why Jesus so dead serious about it. We want to think deeply about Jesus’ warnings and promises and learn more about who he is and what he’s really like. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In today’s passage Jesus first sends a message to the church at Pergamum. Pergamum seems like some random place nobody ever heard of; but in the ancient world it was well-known. Among the seven churches in Revelation, Pergamum is the furthest north, about 50 miles north of Smyrna. Historically, Pergamum was a military city built on a citadel about 1300 feet high. Pergamum also had one of the most important libraries in the ancient world, next to its temple of Athena, the goddess of wisdom. The temple of Asclepius the god of healing was also prominent in Pergamum. Pergamum was famous for its altar to the god Zeus. Pergamum was the first city in Asia Minor to build a temple to a Roman Emperor, Augustus, and Pergamum became the capital of emperor worship in Asia Minor. Its population was estimated to be about 10,000 people.

Look at verse 12. Here Jesus introduces something special about himself to the church in Pergamum. He says he “has the sharp, double-edged sword.” Of all the things he could have said about himself, why this? At that time, the Roman sword was famous as a symbol for Roman justice, and especially of capital punishment. The Roman governor of any province was said to have the power of the sword to execute people (cf. Ro13:4). People were scared of them. But Jesus says that he’s the one who “has the sharp, double-edged sword.” It means Jesus is actually the one who’s sovereign and has the power of life or death. In the Bible, the sharp, double-edged sword also refers to the word of God (Heb4:12). Jesus is the one whose words have the power to penetrate deep within us, to judge the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. In our confusing world his words distinguish clearly who is right and who is wrong.

Read verse 13. Jesus begins by praising the church in Pergamum. Twice in this verse he mentions Satan. Outwardly Pergamum seemed to be a glorious place. But to Jesus, Pergamum is the place where Satan lives and has his throne. This may be a reference to all the pagan religious temples, and especially to the Roman emperor worship. Roman emperor worship was a big problem for the Christians in Pergamum. At this time there was intense pressure for them to join in this emperor worship, and those who refused could be executed. Here Jesus mentions Antipas. This is the only place in the Bible that mentions him. Evidently he was a sincere Christian in Pergamum who refused to participate in emperor worship and eventually was executed. Jesus calls him “my faithful witness.” It means he was faithful to Jesus even to the point of death (2:10b). In his faithful commitment Antipas was like Jesus himself, who is also called “the faithful witness” (1:5) because Jesus told the truth even at the cost of his life. In the environment in Pergamum it was hard to maintain a Christian identity. But Jesus praises the believers there who remained true to his name and refused to renounce their faith that he’s the only one worthy of worship.

To us this may all sound kind of irrelevant. After all, it’s unlikely that any of us would ever get killed today for refusing to renounce our faith in Jesus. But it’s not as irrelevant as it may seem. Jesus still wants us all as believers to live as his faithful witnesses in our day-to-day lives in this real world. How can we be faithful witnesses to Jesus and remain true to his name? We can be active and bold in talking to others about our faith. But what’s in our hearts is even more important. We need to resist social pressures to worship things or people other than Jesus. In our society we don’t have all kinds of gods represented by statues, temples and sacrifices. But we do have all kinds of invisible idols that people are still worshipping in very real ways. An idol can be anything or anyone that takes our priority, that becomes most important. Even good things like a spouse or children or a pet or a vacation or a house or a car can become like idols to us. Today people spend so much time on sports, music or entertainment until these things become like idols. Partying is an idol for many young people. When we remain true to Jesus and don’t participate in popular forms of idolatry, when we give priority to worshiping God, studying the Bible and praying, people think we’re strange. To remain faithful to Jesus and true to his name, we need to resist social pressures to engage in various kinds of idolatry, no matter how uncomfortable it might get. Romans 12:2 says, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

After encouraging them, Jesus also calls them out. Read verses 14,15. In the Old Testament Balaam was a false prophet who tempted the Israelites to commit idolatry and sexual immorality (Nu25:1–3; 31:16). Jesus compares this to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, whom he mentioned earlier in his message to the Ephesian church (2:6). The Ephesian believers hated the practices of the Nicolaitans, but those in Pergamum were quiet about it. Basically, Jesus is rebuking them for compromising with believers who were living as if idolatry and sexual immorality are okay. Of course, their society was full of people for whom idolatry and immorality were considered a “normal” way of life. But idolatry and immorality are never normal for Christians. In verses 14,15 Jesus says twice that some believers in Pergamum were “holding to” the teaching that idolatry and immorality are okay. How could anybody claiming to be a Christian teach that idolatry and immorality are okay? It’s basically a wrong application of the Christian teaching of grace. God’s grace is never a license to commit sin. God gives us his grace in Jesus to set us free from our sins, not to indulge in them.

What should the believers in Pergamum do about this problem in their church? Read verse 16. Here Jesus is talking to those who were not teaching that idolatry and sexual immorality are okay. Why do they have to repent? It’s because they were negligent. They just ignored the people in their Christian community who were doing and teaching those things. They should have been praying for them and trying to help them, but they weren’t. What does mean to “repent”? In this case, repentance is not abstract theology. To repent first means to take responsibility for a problem. Also, to repent means to stop doing nothing and take action. Without taking responsibility and taking action, there’s no real repentance. If they didn’t repent, Jesus said he himself would soon come and fight against these people with the sword of his mouth.

What does this mean? It means that Jesus still “comes” to his churches today in various ways. He comes to comfort and encourage, but also to reveal that he’s real and that his words and judgments are true. How does he do that? In the case of the church at Pergamum, it seems he would come with the sword of his mouth to bring God’s judgment on those holding to heretical teaching. Perhaps some of them would strangely and suddenly die. Not all misfortune in a believer’s life is an expression of God’s judgment for their sin (e.g. Jn9:3). But sometimes God deals with people in the Christian community to reveal that he’s the living God and that people should not abuse his grace or take him lightly. It’s so easy to see a group of Christians as just a bunch of people, think we’re smarter than them and despise them, failing to see God in their midst. In the early church in Jerusalem, God struck down Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the apostles, and really to the Holy Spirit, about their offering (Ac5:1–11). We need to remember that Jesus is alive and present with his people, and that he wants us all to hate what is evil and cling to what is good (Ro12:9).

So in light of verse 16, what should we do? Should we be condemning all the idolatrous and immoral people in our world? Should we drive out from our fellowship anyone struggling with sin? No, of course not. Apostle Paul wrote about something very similar to the church at Corinth: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people” (1Co5:9–11). These are people who are living as if it’s okay, in the name of grace. Keep in mind that Jesus was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He was having fellowship with them, not to condone their sin, but to be like a spiritual doctor to them to help them repent and be healed (Lk5:29–32). But he wants us to be just the opposite with people claiming to be his followers but teaching others to abuse his grace. It’s really painful, but Jesus wants us to do it to keep his church pure and healthy.

Read verse 17. Just as he does with all seven churches, Jesus invites anyone there to have ears to hear what he’s saying through the Spirit. It means not to let it go in one ear and out the other, but take his words to heart and start to act on them. And just as he says to all seven churches, Jesus says, “To the one who is victorious.” In Pergamum a believer needed to win the victory over temptations both without and within, both the idolatry in the culture around them and the temptations even within the fellowship. To the one who is victorious in Pergamum Jesus gives some intriguing promises. First is the hidden manna; second is a white stone with a new name written on it. What do these things mean? Manna was a strange edible substance God gave to the Israelites every day as they wandered in the wilderness, to keep them alive and teach them to depend on him daily. Hidden manna here probably means that if they refuse to compromise with idolatry for financial survival or success, God would provide for them miraculously. In their society stones were used as entrance tickets to the theater, celebrations or sports games. White stones were used by a jury to declare a person on trial innocent. So a white stone here probably means the believer, though condemned by the world, would be declared innocent by Jesus and admitted to the heavenly kingdom. The new name probably means that that person would have a very personal knowledge of Jesus and his grace, which would give them a new identity, and this would also be their ticket into heaven. Jesus still knows and takes care of those who struggle against compromise, and one day he’ll welcome them into his glorious kingdom.

The next church Jesus addresses is the one at Thyatira (18a). Thyatira was about 35 miles southeast of Pergamum. Of all the seven cities mentioned here in Revelation, Thyatira was the least of them all. It’s interesting that among the seven churches Jesus spends the most time talking to this one, the smallest one. Thyatira was a working-class city located on a heavily used trade route, and it was famous for producing swords, boots and purple robes for the Roman army. In Acts 16, Lydia in Philippi who was a dealer in purple cloth was originally from Thyatira. It had a large number of trade guilds. To be a member of these guilds, employees had to attend banquets, worship the god of the guild and indulge in immorality at the party as part of the worship. So Christians in Thyatira faced much of the same pressure as those in Pergamum.

Look at verse 18. Jesus again introduces himself in the form of a judge. This time, he calls himself “the Son of God.” In Thyatira, Apollo, the son of Zeus, was their guardian deity. But the resurrected Jesus is the true Son of God (Ro1:4). The description of Jesus here is similar to that in 1:14,15. His eyes are like blazing fire, meaning he can see through everything. He re-emphasizes this in verse 23 when he says, “I am he who searches hearts and minds.” We can’t hide anything from him. His feet like burnished bronze symbolize his heavenly strength and splendor (cf. Dan10:6).

What does he say to them first? Read verse 19. Again, he starts out by telling them what he knows. He knows all the good things about them. This description is a contrast with the church at Ephesus, the biggest church. That church was known for hard work but no love, and that it was less than what it was at first. But the church in Thyatira maintained its love, and was doing better than it did at first. Deeds of love and faith, service and perseverance—these are deeds that all Christians should be known for. In Revelation, perseverance or endurance is mentioned most (1:9; 2:2,3,19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12). So in this respect these believers were exemplary.

But then Jesus calls them out, too. Read verses 20–23a. Jezebel was a famous wicked queen in the Old Testament who had hundreds of false prophets and was determined to get all Israel to worship idols. Nobody had the courage to challenge her. Even the powerful prophet Elijah ran away from her. Evidently this church had a woman who was like Jezebel. She called herself a prophet. She was teaching the same heresy of abusing God’s grace to indulge in sexual immorality and idolatry. She was leading many of Jesus’ servants astray and probably committing sin with them. She had become a believer and joined the Christian community in Thyatira. But her repentance was not so deep; she still wanted to live in the immorality and idolatry she had enjoyed in her old life. In fact, unlike Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians really struggled with sexual immorality and idolatry (Ac15:20,29). It was because they were so much a part of their culture; to stop engaging in sexual immorality and idolatry would make a person very weird socially. More than that, they could lose their job and business contacts. This woman was teaching believers that it was okay to do these things. According to verse 24 she was saying it was a part of some deep secrets, perhaps that committing sin will help a person experience grace more, an idea which Jesus says here comes from Satan (cf. Ro3:8; 1Co8:4ff.). Evidently Jesus had inspired one of his servants to rebuke her and had given her time to repent, but she was unwilling. So now he rebukes the church for “tolerating” her. And he says he’ll cast her on a bed of suffering, strike her children dead, and cause those who commit adultery with her to suffer intensely. These sufferings might have been some STDs. Her children might be her physical children and/or her followers. It’s another example of Jesus coming to judge his church, to show people more clearly who he really is. Read verse 23b.

What else does Jesus say to this church? Read verses 24,25. Jesus encourages them to “hold on to what you have until I come.” It means to hold firmly to the gospel teachings and to the true grace of God (1Pe5:12; 2Th2:15). This is the only way anyone can avoid falling into spiritual compromise.

Finally, let’s look at what Jesus promises them in verses 26–29. This is based on the prophecy of Psalm 2:7­–9. It’s a prophecy related to Jesus the Messiah. But here Jesus applies it to his faithful followers, and especially to the lowly believers in Thyatira. They would reign with Jesus. The least would become the greatest. He would give them his authority and power to overcome the powers of immorality and idolatry around them, and use them to share the good news with people living as his enemies until they could come under God’s gracious reign. In verse 28 he also promises them the morning star. In 22:16 Jesus himself is described as “the Morning Star,” the one who gives us light, hope, meaning and direction in this dark world (cf. Nu24:17). The Bible promises us that when we pay attention to God’s words, the morning star rises in our hearts (2Pe1:19). This enables us to be Jesus’ faithful witnesses.

Today Jesus challenges us to repent of our negligence, and of our compromise with idols and impurity. He also urges us to hold onto his promises and remain faithful to him. We also saw that Jesus is such a good shepherd, deeply concerned with the spiritual life of his people. May God help us to accept his rebuke and repent, so that we can shine his light in this dark world.