

Where Satan Lives

Scripture: Revelation 2:12-17

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February 14, 2010
Evening Service

People of God: We live in a society that increasingly rejects its Christian heritage as moral constraints are thrown out the window. We live in a time where the influences and temptations of a sinful world are not only right on our doorstep, but within our homes via the TV and the Internet.

But if you we think we face a great conflict in the spiritual battle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, you have not considered the case of the church in Pergamum. Christ says to this church: *I know where you live--where Satan has his throne.* That's a unique description. Satan lives where they live. But what makes this city different so that the influence of Satan is greater in Pergamum than in the other cities? There are two reasons.

First of all, Pergamum was an imperial city. After the Roman Legions conquered this city, it was chosen to be the provincial headquarters for Rome. It was the capital for the region called Asia Minor, which today is the country of Turkey. The city was well suited for this task because it had good defenses. It was located on the top of a thousand foot hill, which dominated a large valley. The name Pergamum means citadel.

Since it was the political center for Asia Minor, it was very loyal to Rome. This loyalty expressed itself in worship of Rome and her emperor. We learnt what this meant last week when we examined the church in Smyrna. Political allegiance meant religious allegiance. It required saying: Caesar is Lord. But this created a conflict with the claim that Christ is Lord. As a result of this conflict, Christians were persecuted for their faith.

There is a second reason why Christ says Satan lives in their midst.

Pergamum was also the center of many cults. Two in particular can be highlighted. There was the altar to Zeus. Zeus was the most important god of the Greeks. As I said, this city was located on a hill. On the top of this hill, was an altar, forty feet high, dedicated to Zeus. It was visible throughout the city. The altar celebrated the great achievements of the Greeks in civilizing the world. As a result, it was just as much a monument to man as it was to Zeus.

More importantly, there was the cult of Asclepius. That's a strange name. Asclepius. But it was the name of a god that was symbolized by the serpent, which of course is also a symbol for Satan. The special power attributed to this god was that of healing. People came from all around to take mind-altering drugs before walking through a tunnel filled with snakes. Due to this claim of healing, this god was also called Soter, meaning Savior.

Its no wonder then that Christ describes Pergamum as the place where Satan lives. Through worship of the empire and the cults, Satan works his deception. A snake, a symbol of Satan, is worshipped as the Savior rather than Christ; Caesar, a mere man, is worshipped as Lord of all rather than Christ. Truly Satan lived in their midst.

Where does Satan live today? Does he live also in the midst of our culture? Some Christians are hesitant to talk about Satan and his influence, while other Christians see Satan lurking around every corner. C.S. Lewis made the comment that Christians make two errors when it comes to the devil. One is to deny his existence. The other is to give him too much power. We need to avoid both errors.

Satan is still alive and active, though he is chained by the Word of God. He is limited in what he can do. But his influence remains. The spiritual forces of sin and evil continue to be at work. In the city of Pergamum, it was through loyalty to Rome and the false religion of Asclepius.

Where does Satan live today? Well, where do we find the strongholds of rebellion against God in our society? Could it be in Hollywood where the portrayal of human life is filled with violence, sensuality and an absence of God? Could it be on Wall Street where corporate greed and a lack of ethics led to a worldwide economic crisis? Could it be in the universities, where relativism is promoted, undermining the truth of God's word?

Whenever and wherever God and his rule is rejected, there Satan has his home. Perhaps Satan lives closer to us than we might think. Perhaps the influence of the Evil One is more pervasive than we would like to acknowledge—perhaps influencing us more than we care to admit. Christ says to his church: *I know where you live, I know where Satan has his*

throne.

Christ has words of praise for this church in Pergamum. They remained true to his name. Notice that Christ does not call the church to leave the city. He does not tell them to flee this place where Satan lives. That would be a tempting option. After all, are we not to flee evil? Wouldn't it better for covenant children to be nurtured in a better environment, one that is more open to the gospel message?

While it is a tempting option for the church to become isolated, to be far removed from Satan's influences, the church is not to abandon this world. She cannot abandon Hollywood, or Wall Street or the universities. The church is to be in the world, though not of it. The church stands as a witness to the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdom of darkness. As a result, the church cannot abandon her position in the world, even though it comes with great temptation and danger. Instead, she must be present in Hollywood, on Wall Street and in the Universities. It is not the church that must flee; it is the influence of the Evil One that must be chased away.

The church remained in Pergamum, in the place where Satan lived. There they gave witness that Jesus Christ is Lord, not Caesar. There they looked to Christ as their savior and healer, not to the cults that surrounded them. They remained true to the name of Jesus. They did not renounce their faith, even in times when they were persecuted for their faith.

Living where Satan lives is not easy. It is a costly affair. It even cost Christians their lives. Christ mentions just one name, Antipas. He is considered the first martyr in Asia. According to tradition, he was slowly boiled to death in a large kettle. Such was the cost of living where Satan lives. In response, Christ gives Antipas a title that was earlier used to describe himself. He is called a faithful witness.

So far this church is like the church of Smyrna that we examined last week. They too were faithful to Christ in the midst of tribulation. But while Christ had no criticism for the church in Smyrna, he does with the church in Pergamum. They have one weakness: they are lax in discipline. They tolerate the teachings of the Nicolaitians. We have come across this group of people before. They were also found in the church of Ephesus. But there the church was exercising discipline. In Ephesus the church hated the practices of the Nicolaitians. They didn't tolerate it in their midst. But this was not the case in Pergamum. In this city, this group was tolerated in their midst.

Now what exactly was this group of Nicolaitians? Well, Christ compares them to Balaam. He says: *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.* This

reference to Balaam is a reference to the story that is recorded in the book of Numbers.

But it's not the story we are probably most familiar with. Most of us know the story of how Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse the people of Israel. But instead of cursing them, God leads Balaam to bless them. But there is another story involving Balaam. After blessing Israel, Balaam finds another way to curse Israel. According to Numbers 25:1, The men of Israel began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to sacrifice to their gods. This was done by the women of Moab on the advice of Balaam. Balaam got the people of God themselves to compromise with world. He became the example of all teachers who lead believers into compromising with the world.

In Pergamum, the Nicolaitians compromised with the world. They taught that one could hold true to the faith as well as participating in the feasts and ceremonies of the cults. This involved sacrificing food to idols as well as engaging in sexual immorality. But this compromise with pagan society was not to be tolerated within the church. That's what Christ had against this church. They tolerated a group who compromised with the world.

The church, today, needs to heed these words of disapproval by Christ. Because compromise with the world continues to be a danger to the well being of the church. It's so easy just to go along with the flow. Let's just water down the ethical standards of the Bible; let's just downplay the doctrinal teachings of the church. After all, we don't want to make it too difficult for us to fit in and feel at home in our society. Besides, in order to reach out into our society, we want to make the Christian faith attractive and non-threatening. These can be the deceptive lies of the evil one, leading the church astray.

Living where Satan lives means being on our guard, watching out for how Satan may seek to undo the work of the church. On the other hand, we cannot isolate ourselves from society. We need to reach out, without compromising the gospel. Sometimes the best defense is a great offense. After all, when we're active for the Lord, speaking about him to others, then Satan can't get a foothold in our lives.

Christ warns the church that if they do not take action, he will take matters into his own hand. He says: *Repent, therefore! Otherwise I will soon come to you and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.* This warning fits in with the opening address of this letter where Christ says: *These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.* This description is also found in the opening vision of Christ in chapter one. The

sword represents judgment. When mentioned in the opening vision, it serves to remind the church that Christ will judge the nations.

But just as he will judge the world, so he will also judge the church. But lest the church be too smug in her position, Christ warns that his sword also reaches into the church. If the church will not exercise discipline within her ranks, Christ himself will do it. If the church does not stop those who advocate compromise with the world, he will.

The church does not have to fear the power of the devil. The church does not have to be afraid of the forces of the world. But the church must stand in awe of her Lord and Head, who will hold us accountable.

Now to those who listen, to those who respond to Christ's voice, to those who reject compromise with the forces of evil, Christ offers two promises. *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.* Manna was of course the food the people of Israel ate in the wilderness. In John 6, Jesus claims to be the true manna sent from heaven. He is the hidden manna. In contrast to the unclean food sacrificed to the idols, this is the heavenly food a believer will eat. It points to the eternal life one has in Christ.

The second promise also reinforces the eternal life one has in Christ. There have been many different suggestions as to what this white stone refers to. Probably it refers to the token that was given out in order to be admitted to a banquet. The white stone given to believers grants them entrance into the heavenly banquet. With this white stone comes a new name. Some say it refers to the new name given to the believers, others that this name refers to Christ. Either way you take it, it highlights the new relationship Christ has with his people. Taken altogether, these promises point to eternal life.

He who has an ear, let him what the Spirit says to the churches. While in the midst of the world, while living where Satan lives, the church can and will experience suffering and difficulty. Christ calls his church to be faithful to his name. Part of that faithfulness means being on guard against those within the church who would compromise with the world. While this task is at times difficult, the promise of Christ is of eternal life, as symbolized by the manna and white stone. *He who has an ear, let him what the Spirit says to the churches.* Amen.