

I. Intro

A. I started as a college pastor back in 1985 – well before many of you were born. And during the three and a half decades that have elapsed, a lot has happened in the world and for all kinds of reasons there have been some challenging and confusing seasons of ministry. But, professionally speaking – there have been more difficult times for me personally or for Sheri and the boys and me as a family – but in terms of my life as a pastor and as someone trying to lead a church, this is the most vexing, unsettling, confusing period I have been in.

B. To be clear, I think God is doing some good things. And I am increasingly hopeful that what is happening will cause to see many to rethink their assumptions about life. By nearly any objective assessment, 21st century Western secularism is breaking down. The easy life many expect is not there. It is obvious that we are far more limited in what we can control.

C. All of this raises lots of questions – such as, what is the worldview that shapes how I interpret what is going on?

II. By way of overview, let me remind you that we are looking at the seven letters Jesus wrote to the seven churches in Asia Minor:

A. The New Testament opens with four Gospels – brief accounts of Jesus' life, teaching, death and resurrection. These are followed by the Book of Acts, which tells about what happens in the 30 years of the church, which starts after Christ's rises from the dead. It traces the spread of the fledgling group as it starts off and then as it picks up speed, spreading from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria and is headed throughout the world. At the end of the New Testament you have the Book of Revelation – which is what we are in right now. (It is the description of what John saw – when he was an old man banished to the island of Patmos and one day, while praying, is swept into Heaven to meet with the Risen, glorious Jesus).

B. Between the end of the Book of Acts and the beginning of Revelation are 21 letters – most written by Paul. Though some also by Peter and James and John. Some are written to people, most are written to churches.

C. In addition to these 21 letters, we have the seven letters Jesus writes which are found in the second and third chapters of the Book of Revelation.

1. The first letter was to the church in Ephesus – which is the big church. Christ said to them: I like your hard work, your doctrinal clarity and your tenacity. But... you have lost your passion for me. Get it back. (And I called on you to write a love letter to God).

2. In the second letter – to the church in Smyrna (the modern city of Izmir), a very small and poor church, and one filled with people who are suffering – he says: good work. You are on the right path. I know you are suffering. Hang in there. It's actually going to get worse before it gets better. Hang on. You are doing the right thing. And your reward in heaven will be amazing.

3. Today we come to what he has to say to the church in Pergamum – which is the modern city of Bergma.

D. Here are some pictures of the ruins.

1. This first is from below the city looking up at it. These were some baths.
 2. This is their theater – built into the side of a hill. It seated 10,000 people.
 3. Here are the ruins of the temple to the emperor Trajan – it is as high up as you can go.
 4. Here is a picture of the path towards the medical complex. Pergamum was a bit like the Mayo Clinic, although they used snakes.
 - a) Medicine wasn't quite as developed then as it is today. Although, the symbol of the American Medical Association has a snake. I was very confused about this as a kid. Why does our doctor have a snake on his door. My Mom didn't know. Well, they got a new logo and they still have a snake on it.
 - b) Here is old logo / and here is the new one.
 - c) The snakes come from Pergamum, which a poisonous snake bit a man they thought was dead and he revived. And after that, for a while snakes figured pretty prominently in medical care.
 5. And finally, here is a map to show you how the seven churches lay out – so you can see that Pergamum is next up on the mail delivery route.
- E. What I am not showing you is the ruins of the library, because there is not much left. At one time it had four rooms and 200,000 books and was the second largest library in the world behind Alexandria in Egypt
1. Lots of stories about the library – at one point, Pergamum tried to lure the librarian from Alexandria away. He was like the hero of the town – the franchise quarterback. This made the King of Egypt so mad, he locked the librarian in jail to prevent him from leaving. He also stopped the sail of papyrus – which grew in Egypt and was use to make paper – to Asia Minor. This lead the people in Pergamum to learn to cure animal skins and write on that. It's called parchment, which is a play on Pergamum and *charta* (the Greek word for sheet).
 2. But then, Mark Antony decided to give the books in Pergamum to Cleopatra as a gift, so he had all 200,000 copies taken to Alexandria. After he died some were returned, but the library never really recovered.
- F. Ancient historians occasionally suggest that Pergamum was like our Washington DC.
1. The common thinking is that Ephesus is New York or Los Angeles – big commercial center with lots of power; Smyrna is San Francisco – sophisticated, cultured with a church that struggles. And Pergamum – which had Rome's provincial offices there – is DC.
 2. Perhaps, but there are a lot of ways in which Pergamum is like the “northern suburbs of Chicago.”
 - a) The big Hellenistic Theater suggests culture.
 - b) The library talks of education.
 - c) The medical facilities point to big pharma.
 3. Which is not to say it's a perfect fit. Pergamum was also a bit like Vegas. There was a sense in which they had all the temptations, which were part of the temples.

- a) Zeus had temple there – he was the god of gods
- b) Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry (and orgies) had a temple.
- c) There was a temple to Demeter – whose focus was on good crops.
- d) And the main Temple was to Caesar – the Temple of Trajan.

4. In ways not immediately obvious to us, a number of these temples had prostitutes and were pretty debased.

G. All of that aside, the big story here is that while the church in Pergamum is doing some things right, Jesus admonishes them for acclimating to the new ideas in circulation. And this is a big deal.

1. When a church finds itself out of step with the culture around it, it has limited options. The people can: 1) close down, either all at once – or slowly; 2) they can try to force their views (enter into the culture wars); 3) retreat from the front lines and try to remain insulated from the world's influence; or 4) find some other approach.

2. There are different ways to talk about this, perhaps the most famous is Reinhold Niebuhr's Christ and Culture. He speaks of five options: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ in paradox of culture and Christ transforming culture.

H. What Jesus has against the church in Pergamum is that they are going along to get along. They are the downside of Christ of culture. They have become uncritically and inappropriately compliant.

III. Rev. 2:12: **To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.**

A. This is a reference to Jesus. We are going to find military language throughout this letter. We tend to not think of Jesus this way. But that is the way He is described in this letter, and that should remind us that we are in a battle.

B. Now, as with the other letters, the way Jesus is described is symbolically linked to the specifics of the city. Here, Jesus is being contrast with the proconsul of Pergamum, who had the power of capital punishment. He had "the power of the sword." So, noting that Jesus has the sharp, double-edged sword, is not just a statement about the words of Jesus being the Word of God - which Hebrews speaks of as a sword. But it suggests that Jesus was not intimidated by any Roman leader's sword. Jesus has one that is sharp and has two edges.

IV. V13: **I know where you live—where Satan has his throne.** This either sounds like a threat, "I know where you live." Or it sounds like they are hanging out in the wrong part of town. Neither is on the mark. He is referencing the temple to Trajan at the very top of the hill. What Jesus is saying is, "I know what you are up against. I know your real challenges." The strong connections to Rome made it hard for Christ-followers in several ways.

V. 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. At some point in the past, a man named Antipas was martyred for his faith in Pergamum. Jesus says, even then – when following me could get you killed - you remained faithful. He affirms them for that.

A. By the way, it's no small slam on the Romans that Jesus refers to their provincial capital as the place where Satan lives.

VI. V14: 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.

A. Balaam is a complicated figure who shows up in Numbers 25. He comes off as sort of an anti-Abraham. Part of what makes him interesting is his ability to curse people.

B. So, towards the end of Israel's wanderings in the desert, the King of Moab – who is growing scared of this large nation in the nearby desert – recruits Balaam to curse Israel. He offers to pay him to curse them with bad luck. Balaam says yes. But then he can't do it. Every time he tries to call down some pox on Israel, he blesses them.¹

C. Eventually, he gives up. But he says to Balak, "Look, I can't curse Israel, but here is how you could bring them down." And what he suggests involves sending foreign women to seduce them and then to introduce the worship of false gods.

D. So, instead of attacking them from an outside army, he suggests he help them fall from within.

VII. V15: Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. The suggestion here is that, in a related way, they are allowing bad thinking in. This is a reference to immorality and idolatry.

VIII. V16: Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. More military language here. John Stott asks: How is error in the church to be defeated? Only by the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.²

IX. Please note the call to repentance – which is a change of heart and mind that starts as we own our sin (as we confess it) and turn from it to God, asking for forgiveness.

A. Note: it's not just turning from sin or regretting sin. These are starting points related to repentance, but in the Bible, the word repent means "to change one's mind." And the suggestion is, true repentance will result in a change of actions.

B. And this is a big idea in the Bible.

1. We see the prophets calling on people to repent and go the other way.

2. John the Baptist called on people to repent; Jesus picks up where John leaves off. In John 1, we are told that Jesus begins his ministry telling people "to repent and believe the Gospel."

3. In Mark 6 we see that the disciples were sent out to tell people to repent.

C. There are lots of passages on this. We are focused here today because:

1. The call to repent shows up in five of the seven letters.³

2. Today is Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish year – which is about repentance.
 - a) By the way, we are offering a Yom Kippur service, which will be led by ???, who is a Messianic Jew. He will be leading this service – which will be online – and
3. And the third reason we are highlighting this call to repent is because several different national groups are calling on Christians to repent today – and named today Repentance Sunday. Doing so before God on behalf of the country.
- D. So we are going to end with a prayer of repentance.
- E. Let me acknowledge, that loud voices on the fringes have made thoughtful conversations with people who think differently about many issues – in particular race - very difficult to have these days.
- F. Let me also remind you that shortly after the death of George Floyd, I preached a message on race in which I said:
 1. Racism is evil; The problems are bigger than most think; we have no choice but to reform, Violence in wrong and the church needs to step up.
 2. I then set out a PLEA – asking you to Pray, Listen, Engage and Acknowledge
- G. Those sermons drew a fair bit of email.
 1. In particular my point about some sin being systemic.
 - a) I argued: this is a broken world. And broken people have created some broken structures – and many in the majority culture have been blind to the ways some of these structures have created invisible advantages for them.
 - b) I do not buy everything some want to make about that. But given that Daniel owned the sins of his land, and what we see with Achan and in Romans 5, I said, we all need to realize that as Westerners we think more individualistically than is assumed in the Bible.
 2. The other was about acknowledging any collective guilt. Engaging in any collective repentance.
- H. Let me share with you what I shared with some who wrote – that is, my goal is not to find a middle way.
 1. I noted that I was taking the PLEA challenge very seriously, and would be setting out to do a lot of listening and reading and thinking about race. And I have been – there are a few related discussions quietly happening at the church.
 2. But my goal in this was not to find a balance between the left and the right. That is not what Jesus did. We are not to follow the Elephant or the Donkey, but the Lamb who was slain.
- I. And one of the things the Lamb tells me to do is Confess and Repent. And so we will be ending the service with a time of repentance.
- J. Moving on:

X. V17: Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. This is a line that will be repeated. It suggests that not all who have ears hear.

XI. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. This is a reference in part to Jesus – He is the Bread of Life. And it is an obvious call to persevere.

XII. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it. Again, there is a reward for those who persevere. There are a lot of theories about the white stone. In fact, I am not sure I have ever found a passage in the Bible about which there is less agreement. I am not going to start to list them.⁴ Having read a bunch of ideas, I will note two:

A. Some note that around this time invitations to high-end Roman parties were often carved into rocks. The idea is that not everyone gets these invitations – those who remain true do. And the fact that it's white perhaps hints at purity.

B. Others focus more on the name part of this statement – suggesting that this new name reflects our truest identity, or that it is the name of Jesus, who becomes our identity, or perhaps that there is secret information shared only between us and God, which hints at a kind of intimacy shared only between a husband and wife.

C. It's hard to know what to make of this, other than, there are rewards for those who remain faithful.

XIII. So if we step back from this text, what we find it:

A. A church that commended for remaining faithful in the face of external threats and persecution.

B. And a church that is being warned that they are compromising with error and as a result are growing weak on the inside.

C. There is a sense in which they are the opposite of Ephesus. The Ephesian church was full of people who were doctrinally pure, but had lost their passion for Christ. The people in Pergamum appear to be more passionate on all fronts, but they are forfeiting doctrinal truth in order to get along.

D. Or to state this differently, “the problem in the church in Pergamum is not that it is in Pergamum. It is that there is too much Pergamum in the church.”

XIV. Twenty years ago I preached a sermon on this passage.

A. I had just joined the staff as a part-time associate pastor. Bob Thomas was doing this series and I was assigned to preach on the church in Pergamum. I remember this sermon in part because, in an effort to contextualize it, I did a lot of reading on culture and in particular on tolerance.

B. The church in Pergamum was being scolded for uncritically adopting the culture of the day. It occurred to me that being tolerant was the premier virtue of that day. This was twenty years ago, and at that point, being intolerant was about the only serious sin left. I spent time noting:

1. That the definition of tolerance was changing. Whereas it had always meant, “I disagree with you but am not going to try to stop you.” Being tolerant was starting to mean, I will fully support you. I will fully affirm everything you are asking me to affirm.”

2. I went on to note that those advocating tolerance were very intolerant of those who didn't share their definition of tolerance.
3. I also noted that the list of things we were expected to affirm kept changing.
4. And finally, I said that as Christians, all of this was problematic because – in addition to other reasons, we are not called on to tolerate people we disagree with – we are called to love them.

XV. Let me now note, that in the last twenty years, things have changed.

- A. Tolerance is now out. As has been noted, not just by Christians or by cultural conservatives, but by a growing number of secular people – such as Jonathan Haidt, a self-described liberal, Jewish atheist – there is a growing illiberalism within liberalism.
- B. Some of the loudest voices out there today are committed to shutting down voices they disagree with and to demanding an end to free speech. There is a growing movement that says, there are all kinds of things no one can talk about, and a growing group of people that should not be heard from. And far from tolerating those we disagree with, we should silence or cancel them.
- C. This is troubling and needs more time and attention – although not in this sermon.
- D. I do not think the trust of this text is to engage in cultural exegesis. It's not to take a deep dive into Critical Theory
 1. I am doing that – and in this Friday's Update I sent out a few articles on Critical theory – not so much Critical Race Theory, which is very much in the news, but on Critical theory more generally. We need to be alert to the ways society is moving so we can find the good to affirm but the harmful to be alert to.
- E. But that isn't what this passage calls us to. What we are called to is to repent. And we are going to do that

XVI. First, let me give you your letter assignment.

- A. After the Ephesus sermon I challenged you to write a love letter to God.
- B. After Smyrna I suggested you write a letter to someone who is suffering
- C. I am now inviting you to write a letter to your future self.
 1. You saw a video last week setting that up. This week I want you to reflect on this moment from the vantage point of ten years from now – to reflect on how you hope to respond and offer yourself some advice. Then if you like, you can put it in a self-addressed stamped envelope and give it to one of the staff, and we will mail it to you in a few months.

XVII. Closing Prayer / End of Video

XVIII.

XIX. .

XX. **Campus Pastor: The Call to Repentance**

- A. **As you have heard.**

1. Our passage today calls on us to repent.
 2. And at sundown tonight, Yom Kippur, the day the Jews set aside for national repentance, begins.
 3. And thousands of churches are joining together today to declare this Repentance Sunday.
- B. I want to invite you now to join with me – and others – in confessing our sin and asking for God to heal us and bring peace and justice to our land.
- C. I am not going to rehearse all of the challenges we face – a pandemic, societal unrest, fires out West, an epidemic of loneliness, hurricanes in the South east – and so much more. Let me simply give you a few moments to ponder the ways God is getting your attention, and to reflect on the ways Revelation 2:12 applies to your life.
- D. We will be using the 500 year old classic prayer of repentance from Thomas Crammer. It is found in the Book of Common Prayer. It is simple and short.
1. Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.
- E. It leads us to confess as individuals and corporately as a church.
- F. Let me give you a moment to prepare your heart.
- G. Time of Silence
- H. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 we are told: If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.
- I. Let me ask you to stand and join with me in praying this corporate prayer of confession:
1. Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

¹ This includes some wonderful prophecies about Christ.

² John Stott picks up on this important symbol in the letter to Pergamum: God's way to overcome error is the proclamation of the gospel of Christ which is God's power of salvation to everyone who believes. Falsehood will not be suppressed by the gruesome methods of the inquisition, or by the burning of heretics at the stake, or by restrictive State legislation or even by war. Force of arms cannot conquer ideas. Only truth can defeat error. The false ideologies of the world can be overthrown only by the superior ideology of Christ. We have no other weapons but this sword. Let us use it fearlessly, and by the open manifestation of the truth storm the strongholds of Satan. John R. W. Stott, *What Christ thinks of the Church: Insights from Revelation 2-3*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1958), 63

³ Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis and Laodicea

⁴ See Boice, p. 100.