

Conforming

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- [0 : 0 0] Well, thank you very much, Alice. Please do keep that passage open in front of you as we explore it over the next few minutes. But let us pray together before we do that. Let's pray.
- Heavenly Father, we come before you this morning and recognize that to understand your word, we need your spirit to work in our hearts. And so, Father, that is our prayer, that you would soften our hearts, that we would hear your word and, Father, that we would be transformed.
- We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. I recently saw a funny video that was a secret social experiment to see how people copy those around them without really thinking about it too much.
- So they filmed a doctor's surgery waiting room and there were 10 people sitting in this surgery. It was before COVID, don't worry. But nine of those 10 people were actors.
- And one of the people there was the test subject, but they didn't know that they were being tested. And every minute or so, a buzzing sound would come over the speakers and all the actors would stand up for a few seconds and then sit down.
- [1 : 1 6] The test subject confused the first time he saw it, wasn't sure what was going on, but then the second time stood up confidently. And as it continued time and time again, his confidence grew.
- But then one by one, the actors left the room and the buzzing sound continued. With each buzz, he stood up with more and more confidence. And yet the point where he was alone in the room.
- All the actors had left. The buzzing came on. No pressure to conform to those around him. No peer pressure. And yet he still stood up. Now this is a silly and small experiment which points to a deeper and more serious reality that we conform to, we copy what goes on around us.
- And I'm saying this because it has something to do with our passage this morning. Because in these short verses in Revelation chapter 2, we're going to hear a sober warning.
- Not to conform to the world around us. The warning in this passage that should be sending off alarm bells in our minds is that we cannot hold to Christ and to the world.
- [2 : 3 4] We cannot conform to the sinful patterns that are always going on around us. Do not conform to the world, Jesus says, but cling to him.
- Last week in Smyrna, the church were suffering persecution and they were in need of encouragement. So Jesus revealed himself to them as the first and the last.
- The one who had died, but also the one who had risen to life again. And each of these letters in the book of Revelation begin with a description of Jesus that is particularly relevant to the situation of each church.
- So turn with me to verse 12 and see how our passage begins this morning. These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

Now we might read that and think, yes, how encouraging. Jesus is reminding this church who are suffering that he has the power and the means to protect them.

[3 : 42] But we need to take the whole Bible into consideration when we look at this verse because that is not what Jesus is saying. If you flick over a few pages previously to Hebrews chapter 4 verse 12, this is what it says.

For the word of God is alive and active, sharper than any two double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.

It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. This sword is the word of God proceeding from the mouth of Jesus.

And we see that in Revelation chapter 1 verse 16. Jesus is warning the church in Pergamum that he will come and he will use this sword on the body of believers that meet there.

With this word of God, Jesus comes and uncovers, he lays bare the hearts of the people in this church and he judges their hearts.

[4 : 48] And he sees something that he commends. But he also sees something that he condemns. And that will be subject to his judgment. Friends, that is why it is so important that everything we believe is based on the Bible.

Not what culture says. Not what the newest, trendiest religious leader says. And definitely not what the world says. Everything we believe must come from this book because it is God's revealed word.

And on that final day, as we all stand before Christ, he will judge with power and authority. So at the beginning of this short letter to the church in Pergamum, we get this warning from Jesus that he will uncover everything and judge the hearts of this church.

Jesus sees what's going on. And he sees something he commends and something he condemns. Well, the first thing we see in this passage is what Jesus commends in verses 12 to 13.

Jesus commends. So Jesus begins, as he does with most of these letters, encouraging this church with reasons that he has to commend them.

[6 : 08] But notice how he starts in verse 13. This is the voice of a loving Lord and Savior.

This is the voice of comfort and reassurance. This is not a threat. But Jesus says he knows their situation. If you were on the street and you saw someone crying on their knees in pain and agony as they are afflicted and neglected, what would you do?

If someone felt alone and abandoned, well, you would get down on your knees next to them, wouldn't you? When someone's entire life seems to have fallen away from under their feet, you sit with them in their pain and you listen.

Listen, that is what Jesus is doing here. He's drawing alongside a church that is hurting and he's saying, look, you're not alone. I know where you live.

I know the situation you find yourselves in and I am here for you. The church in Pergamum, or your Bible may say Pergamos, it's the same city.

[7 : 25] This city was very religious. There were temples to both Greek and Roman gods, temples to Zeus and Athena and more, and three temples dedicated to the worship of the Roman emperor.

That is why twice in these few verses, this city is described as the place where Satan lives or the place where Satan has his throne.

And as we thought about last week with Archie, the first century Christians initially had protection under the Roman Empire because they were thought to be Jews.

But at this point, that protection had stopped. Now they were being seen as a sect like everybody else and they needed to conform to the pagan worship that was going on around them and pay homage to and worship the emperor.

Pergamum isn't called the city of Satan specifically because of emperor worship. The emperor here is not Satan.

[8 : 32] But Pergamum is called the city where Satan lives because this whole city was characterized by worshipping false gods. It invaded every area of life.

If you wanted to be someone in this city, you needed to go to the right festivals, the right meetings, the right celebrations, all revolving around pagan worship.

Satan has power in this city. And he has his people there who are making life horrible for Christians. It was so bad that Antipas was martyred.

Now we know next to nothing about this man except for the description Jesus gives him here as a faithful witness or a better translation of that word is a faithful martyr.

Jesus describes himself in the same way in Revelation chapter 1 verse 5. So this man followed in the example of Jesus and gave up his life for his faith.

[9 : 35] But even in this city where Satan has power, the resounding truth that the Bible teaches and the repeated emphasis of the whole book of Revelation is that no matter what weapons Satan throws against you, no matter what weapons Satan does use, Jesus wins.

Jesus wins. Does Satan have power? Yes, he does. But that power is held in check by a God who is in control of all things.

Satan is a defeated foe who will never, ever overcome the Lord's people. But Jesus knows that this is a hard place for them to live in.

And so he says to this hurting church, I know your situation. Yet be comforted because I know that you remain true to my name and have not renounced your faith in me.

This church stood firm in the face of opposition and persecution when the pressure around them was mounting up to renounce Christ for a more comfortable life so that they could join in with the world.

[11 : 15] Just renounce Christ. That was what they were being told every day. Some people in this church stood firm in their faith and they said no. When the world came knocking and they were being dragged through the mud, they would not bow to fake gods and renounce Jesus.

They stood firm. Friends, can the same be true about us? Would Jesus say the same thing? We need to hold fast to our confession in Jesus.

Stand firm in face of opposition and persecution. We are surrounded by a world and people who worship a plethora of fake gods. Sure, they may not be graven idols that we see on people's mantelpieces as we go into their homes, but the world idolizes sex as a thing to chase after and enjoy regardless of the costs.

And that is contrary to the Christian worldview that sex is to be enjoyed between one man and one woman in the covenant marriage relationship. And when we stand up for those truths, we will be opposed.

When the world thinks about success and it pushes that idea that you need to have a big house, a flashy car, the latest upgrade, the newest branded clothes, we are called to stand firm in Christ and not get sucked into the idolatry around us.

[12 : 51] But what about those times when everyone is acting a certain way, mocking the government, breaking the guidelines, getting drunk, and the list continues?

As Christians, we should stand firm. It will mean that we are seen as weird. It will mean that we will be sidelined and shunned, but it is better to live for the approval of Christ than it is the approval of the world.

Jesus says to you this morning, if this is you, I know where you live. Sure, our situation is not the same as the church in Pergamon. We're not being persecuted to this extent.

But the reality is the same. And Jesus draws near to you this morning and he says, I know your struggles. I know your pain.

I know your temptations. Friends, my prayer is that for every single one of us, Jesus could say, yet you remain true to my name.

[14 : 01] You did not renounce your faith in me. Jesus commends this church in Pergamon because even in their suffering, they hold firm to Christ.

But at the same time, there were those in the church who were flirting with the world. And the second thing we see in this passage is what Jesus condemns in verses 14 to 17.

Jesus condemns. The big problem in the church in Pergamon is that there were Christians, regulars at church, those who sat in services week in, week out, listened to their teaching and sermons and yet were compromising their faith and mixing it in with the ways of the world.

And there were also those who knew it was happening and did nothing about it. There were some in this church who were trying to have their feet in two camps, in the church and in the world.

But like every spy movie has ever taught us, working for two completely different sides never works. There were some who were professing Jesus with their mouths but engaging in pagan worship at the same time.

[15 : 18] They would sit in services, be saying and doing all the right things but then go home and do things completely contrary to the word of God.

They were playing a dangerous game. Jesus says in verse 14, read with me, 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.

Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. There were people in this church who thought that they could hold the teaching of Christ, the teaching of the Christian faith at the same time as that of other religious leaders and establishments that promoted sexual immorality and eating food that had been sacrificed to idols.

The problem in this church is that sexual immorality and idolatry have been called out as the main sins and temptations because they've become normal for them.

And we see that because of the names mentioned, Balaam and Balak. These names take us back to the book of Numbers in the Old Testament where Balak, a Moabite king, called on Balaam, a prophet of the Lord, to curse the nation of Israel.

[16 : 53] And you can read this later on in Numbers chapter 22, 22 to 25. And Balaam, who was supposed to be a prophet of the Lord, told the king of Moab to seduce Israel into sexual immorality and idolatry.

These names are used as examples of the depths of depravity of some of the people in this church. There were people who were caught up in this idolatry and sexual immorality and they were going unchallenged.

But before we cast this church off, we need to come to terms with the reality that the same thing can be happening in this church today. It may look very different, but it can be true.

Maybe we're not going to pagan temples and sacrificing to idols made of wood or stone. Today, that might look like us neglecting our church family on the altar of comfort.

Neglecting to engage in a meaningful way in church because we're happy to go it alone. And instead, going out for walks on Sunday morning instead of tuning into church.

[18 : 12] Maybe we aren't going to temples and engaging in sexual immorality with prostitute priestesses and priests. But how many people in the church today engage in sex outside of marriage?

How many people are addicted to pornography? How many people have lustful thoughts as they walk down the street and see someone else? Friends, this passage, this message is not just relevant for a church 2,000 years ago.

It is a message that we need to hear today. You cannot, you cannot hold to Christ and conform to the world at the same time.

Jesus and the world, sin and perfection, holiness and debauchery are not compatible. the sins that you do in private or the sins that you do in public that ensnare your life, that draw you to idolatry and sexual immorality.

There's everything outside of God's plan. All of those sins are seen by the Lord and you may hide them for a while but everything will come to light one day.

[19 : 33] Jesus is the one with the two-edged sword that penetrates the heart and lays bare everything before him and he will judge.

All of us will need to give an account of our lives before the Lord on the end. Nothing can be hidden from him. And our responsibility as a church is to hold each other accountable, to care for each other because the problem in Pergamum was this was going on and people knew about it and yet they did nothing about it.

Friends, we need to get out of our comfort zones and start calling sin, sin. We need to go the extra mile, make ourselves uncomfortable, submit fully to Christ and live in a way that pleases him through the power of his Holy Spirit.

And if we fail in this regard which we will because we are sinful human beings there is comfort because that is not the end. Look at verse 16 Jesus says repent.

It is never too late for people to return to the Lord and ask for forgiveness and the promise that we see in Scripture is all those who come to Christ forgiveness is given.

[20 : 57] But we are called to flee sin. A Christian cannot flirt with the world and expect to remain pure. We must Usain Bolt it in the other direction.

And Jesus tells us this not because he is a killjoy but because he loves us and because he knows the situations that we are in he knows we are weak and he knows that we cannot expect to dabble in sin to flirt with the world and not sin.

And if this morning you are trying to hold on to the world and at the same time hold on to Christ listen to those words in verse 16 repent therefore otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Now this is sobering language that should wake us all up this morning. If you are living in sin whether privately or publicly and at the same time trying to confess Christ Jesus says that he will come and he will fight against you.

It's also a wake up call for all of us brothers and sisters in the body of Christ to look out for each other because we should see this and not want anyone to fall into that judgment.

[22 : 22] We have a responsibility to care for people and to do it wisely. Friends wake up wake up from your slumber and your sin and return to Christ.

Reject the fleeting comforts of this world because they're meaningless. They are short-lived and they will only leave you empty and hurting and under the judgment of Christ because you cannot have Jesus and the world.

But the Bible isn't naive. Living like this is difficult. But the reality, this is the reality of the Christian life because it means dying to ourselves and living for Christ, forsaking all else but him.

And that's precisely why Jesus goes on to explain the result of those who do renounce the world and live for him in verse 17. 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. Do you see that victory language?

[23 : 46] Jesus knows that living this way is a battle. It is a fight, a spiritual war that is won by patient obedience and responsiveness to God's word.

And persevering to the end, overcoming sin, clinging to Christ will result in a wonderful inheritance. And Jesus highlights two rewards that await those who fight the good fight and continue to the end.

So this morning, if you are in this spiritual battle, if you are feeling beaten and you want to throw in the towel, if you're struggling in your holiness and finding it hard to focus on Christ, here is what Jesus says awaits for those who are victorious, who overcome the sins of conformity and tolerating sin in our lives.

Jesus promises first that he will give hidden manna to his people. As God's people, we're in the wilderness in the book of Exodus. The Lord provided them with manna, a type of food that sustained them in the wandering in the wilderness.

The point that Jesus is making here to this church is that he will sustain and provide for them in this tension between the kingdom of God not yet being complete and the suffering that they face.

[25 : 10] Friends, this means that as you battle against your flesh and blood, to live for Jesus, as you release your grip on the world and you cling fully to Christ, he will sustain you.

That's what he promises. He will give you the strength that you need by the Holy Spirit to persevere until the end. But it is hidden.

You will not see it. You may not even feel it all the time. But Jesus promises to provide for and sustain you in your present suffering until that day that his kingdom comes in all of his glorious fullness.

And then the second reward that Jesus offers in verse 17 is a white stone with a new name written on it known only to the one who receives it.

Now there are a number of ideas what these white stones could mean but I think the most convincing is that stones were used for voting. So a black stone was a negative vote and a white stone was a positive vote.

[26 : 18] So if someone was tried in a court of law they were given a white stone if proven innocent once the trial was over. And so Jesus is saying that on that final day he will give those who remain faithful to him a white stone.

A sign of their complete innocence through his death and resurrection and their perseverance to the end and he will give them a new name. This fulfills a prophecy in Isaiah 62 verse 5.

Please do look at it later. That those who remain faithful to the Lord in Israel will be given a new name. As a Christian your identity has changed.

And if you live that out until the end, if you wage war well and persevere you will be given a new name by your Lord and Saviour in the end.

This short letter to the church in Pergamon is bookended by the comforting truth and challenging truth that Jesus knows everything about each and every one of us.

[27 : 30] Jesus knows where you live. He knows that you are surrounded by temptation. He knows that you get invitations all the time to go to the wrong places, to hang out with the wrong crowds, and he knows that it's so easy to accept.

He knows you're surrounded by things that draw you to sin all the time, but he calls you to persevere and to stand firm in him. Think back to the test subjects, sitting in the doctor's waiting room and acting like everybody else.

The reality is that as Christians we can so easily be caught up to do the same as the world and to conform to the sinful patterns that go on around us every day.

But Jesus tells us that he knows all things. He knows our lives and he says do not conform to the pattern of this world. do not think that you can hold on to Christ and the world at the same time, but instead wage war against sin.

Wage war against wrong theology and cling to Christ alone. Because persevering to the end, running the race until the finish line means that we will dwell with him forever in perfect harmony.

[29 : 03] And he promises to sustain you until that day that we hear those life-giving words, well done, well done, good and faithful servant.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we pray that as we read your word, by your spirit you would show us things that we are to be commended for, but also show us the reality of things that we know deep down we will be condemned for.

And Lord, would that reality wake us up? Would it help us release our grip on the world and cling solely to you? Father, forgive us.

Father, we thank you for that comforting truth that for every time we fail and we repent, that your forgiveness is granted, that Jesus has paid the price, and that we are forgiven by the precious blood of the Lamb.

Jesus, thank you. Amen.