

COMPROMISED IDENTITY

SERIES: WAKE UP



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Revelation 2:12-17
Fifth Message
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Revelation 2:12-17

My wife and I moved from Texas to the Bay Area right after we were married in 1999. We had flown out before the wedding to look at places to live and were considering one near downtown Sunnyvale. Friday night we went out to a restaurant nearby. It was not a good night.

The people at the table next to us were drunk and loud. The restaurant seemed to promote the skimpy outfits of the waitresses more than the food. It felt more like a frat party than a nice evening. We left and I remember my wife saying, "There's no way we're living here."

The next morning, just for good measure, we came back to take one more look. Now it was Saturday morning and instead of a frat party, we discovered a Farmer's Market. Fruit and vegetables. Families were pushing strollers. Food tents and music. It was incredible. We left that morning with my wife saying, "We are definitely living here."

We live in a certain culture in a certain place. There are things we like about this culture. There are other things we don't like. As Christians, if we are trying to follow Jesus in Silicon Valley, there are things we stand against. There are other things we accept and even celebrate.

Finding that line is sometimes easy. Other times it's more complicated. What parts of our culture do we reject? What parts do we accept? How do we decide?

We're continuing our series this morning in the book of Revelation. We've titled this series "Wake Up" because we are hopeful this book will help to snap us out of the complacency our lives tempt us toward. We need to be reminded of the heavenly so that we can live more effectively in the earthly.

One of the repeated issues throughout this book is how the church interacts with the culture they live in. This week we're looking at the third of seven direct letters from Jesus to churches in Asia Minor in the first

century. This particular community struggles with the issue of allowing the culture they live in to entice them away from true faithfulness to Christ. We'll see that they have developed a compromised identity.

Of the seven letters, the first and last are the most critical. The second and sixth are the most positive. The three in the middle are mixed. This is one of the "it's complicated" letters. Once again, as we read this letter, we need to remember that this letter was written to a city named Pergamum in Asia Minor in the first century. It wasn't written to us.

But we have to ask whether we struggle with any of the same things this church wrestled with. Have we compromised our identity as Christians in an effort to live in our culture?

Are we completely materialistic? Are we addicted to our own productivity? Are we obsessed with our careers? Are we oblivious to some of these problems?

There are parts of our lives we can't imagine living without. There are things we need to lay aside which seem integral to the life we lead. Thousands of years ago in the city of Pergamum, they had the same problem.

So Jesus spoke into it and helped them discern. Jesus divided the good from the bad for them. That's our prayer this morning. We need this text to help us discern. We need the Spirit to open our eyes.

You might remember these letters usually contain seven elements: the command to write, a description of Jesus, a commendation for the church, a rebuke, an exhortation to act, a notice to listen, and a promise to receive. I'll read the whole letter, then we'll walk through those elements.

Each of these seven elements contributes to the overall point of this letter. The church had compromised their identity. They need to repent in order to re-align themselves with the truth of the Gospel.

Revelation 2:12-17:

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 13 ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. 15 So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’

Command

The letter begins with the simple command to write to Pergamum,

COMMAND: "to the angel of the church in Pergamum"

It helps to know a little bit about this city of Pergamum. This city had a lot of claims on being a strong civic center. It was the first city to build a temple to the Roman Emperor as part of what is called the imperial cult. That temple was built in 29 BC. There were huge temples to Zeus and Asclepius, the god of healing, signified by a serpent. There was a huge theater that seated 10,000 people.

Pergamum was a center of Roman government and pagan religion. Life in this city in the first century revolved around being a part of the powerful Roman Empire.

You can understand how the Christians in that city faced a unique challenge to live out their faith. How do you be a part of this culture as you stay true to Jesus. How do you live in a city which proclaims "Caesar is Lord" when you believe that "Jesus is Lord"?

Later on in the letter, Jesus describes Pergamum as Satan's dwelling place, where his throne is located. No other place in the New Testament is described with that kind of language. This could be a reference to the temple of Zeus or the huge steep theater or the imperial temples. But whatever the specifics were, this was a difficult place in which to follow Jesus.

What about the Bay Area? If Jesus were writing a letter to us, how would he describe this area? Would he say Satan's throne is here? I don't know, but we can at least ask what Satan's influence is in our area. Whose thrones have been built in our area? Whose thrones are in the Bay Area?

The Bay Area is a unique place. We have an incredibly strong sense of our geography here. We like to talk about housing prices. We like to brag about the influential companies we are surrounded by. We're fascinated by the shiny corporate campuses and free food and upcoming startups. We love the land and the weather and the diverse culture.

But living here requires a certain kind of allegiance. Most of you don't just work for your companies. You believe in your companies. If you have kids and they attend a school, you are expected to volunteer there. Recreational activities like sports or music or hobbies aren't just interests. They are commitments in your life.

Not every culture is like this. There are places where jobs are jobs, schools are schools, and recreational activities are just fun. But our culture involves a huge amount of allegiance. We put our personal identities into what we do here.

The book of Revelation speaks a lot about thrones and authority and the power of the culture we live in. We don't live in a city which proclaims Caesar as Lord. But our area has powerful lords. Who are they? Whose thrones are here?

Description

After the basic command for the letter, we are given a snapshot of Jesus. Remember, each of these commands is drawn from the vision in chapter 1 and the rest of the book. Here, Jesus is the one with the two-edged sword.

DESCRIPTION: "him who has the sharp two-edged sword"

We saw in chapter 1 and see later in verse 16 that this sword comes from his mouth. This image fits with

the picture of the servant from Isaiah whose mouth is described as a sharp sword in Isaiah 49:2.

The phrase which I think gives us the best understanding of this sword is from Hebrews 4:12. The author compares the word of God to a sharp two-edged sword, saying,

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

I love to cook meat. I have a smoker I often use and lately I have been experimenting with a way of cooking meat called "sous-vide." But before you cook meat, you have to trim it. That's not my favorite part. You need a sharp knife. Usually, you want to slice off the fat so you can discard it, but leave the meat.

It's tricky. Sometimes you slice too deep and carve away precious meat. Sometimes you are too shallow and you don't get all the fat. It's an art to slice exactly what you want to cut.

That's what we need as we live in our culture. We need a tool which can help us to divide and separate the meat from the fat. To call out the parts of our culture we want to avoid and the parts we want to celebrate. Think about your own life. What needs to be divided? Where are the lines unclear? What needs to be divided in your life?

We can err on both sides. Sometimes Christians take part in things they shouldn't. They let the culture influence them. We'll see that is what the people of Pergamum do. But other times, we simply reject whole parts of culture in an effort to stay pure.

Should we boycott Halloween and lose out on relationship in our neighborhood? Should we avoid technology but miss out on a powerful communication tool? Should we stay out of politics, but our hamper our ability to influence our country?

We need a sharp sword to find the line we want to hold. It's a good thing Jesus comes with one in his mouth. These words are the words of that sword. This is why we preach the Bible. It is the Word of God, from the mouth of Jesus which will help us to cut that line.

Jesus begins by showing the church what's going well.

Commendation

They are given affirmation for the way they have held onto faith.

COMMENDATION:

you hold fast my name
You did not deny my faith

The church in Pergamum had not given up. They had held onto faith in a city described as Satan's dwelling place. They did not walk away from Jesus. They did not deny faith in Christ. That's remarkable.

It is not an easy thing to call yourself a Christian in the Bay Area. But many of you have. You don't have to be here on a Sunday morning. You could be at the gym or on your bike ride or sleeping in or trying the newest brunch spot. Thanks for being here instead. You've chosen to make your faith important enough to factor into your schedule and that's a great thing.

Is this true for you? How have you done at holding fast the name of Jesus? Have you held fast his name?

In the TV show *Silicon Valley*, one of the episodes centered around a group of entrepreneurs. It came to light that one of them was a Christian. And no one would work with him. He was completely outcast by everyone. Following Jesus put him in a completely different category that no one could relate to.

In my experience, that's a bit of an exaggeration. But some of those dynamics are real. If you've persisted and held onto your faith, that's something to celebrate.

But it looks like one of the ways the people of Pergamum had been able to do that is by losing a little of what made their faith unique. That's where the letter goes next.

Rebuke

This church is criticized for allowing false doctrine into their midst. But notice that the false doctrine has mostly to do with behavior, not so much with ideas. Here's the content of the rebuke.

REBUKE:

Hold the teaching of Balaam / Nicolaitans
Eat food sacrificed to idols
Practice sexual immorality

The Nicolaitans were probably a recognized group during this time. We heard about them in the letter to Ephesus as well. We don't know much about them apart from this reference. One possibility is that they were founded by Nicolaus, one of the first deacons in Acts 6. We can speculate about them, but the one clear thing is described here: they are teaching people that it's okay to eat meat sacrificed to idols and engage in sexual immorality.

The Nicolaitans are compared to the Old Testament prophet named Balaam. In Numbers 22 and following verses, we hear about how Balak, the king of Moab tried to hire Balaam. He wanted Balaam to issue a curse against the Israelites so the Moabites could defeat them. Three times Balaam tried to curse the Israelites, but he couldn't curse them directly. He had to say the words God gave him.

But later (Numbers 31:16) we read that Balaam led the people astray by encouraging them to intermarry with Moabite women. For this, he was killed by the sword. For all we know it was probably a sharp two-edged sword.

Balaam wasn't able to directly curse Israel. But he was able to get them to water down their identity by compromising with the culture they lived in. This is the significance of sexual immorality and eating meat sacrificed to idols. Aspects of the culture which were incompatible with true faith in Christ had slipped into their daily lives.

The people of Pergamum had crossed a line. They lost a critical part of their identity as followers of Jesus. They held onto faith, but they gave up the nature of it.

For us, this comes as an important warning. We have to be careful to find that line of how much to engage in culture. There is a danger of compromise, of losing our identity in an attempt to live well with our culture. We have to avoid compromise.

These weren't subtle, nuanced issues. They were simple and easy to identify. And earthy. These issues had to do with how you used your body. What you ate, who you ate with, and who you had sex with. Primary kinds of issues.

For us, I think we can see two categories. The first is easier to understand. They are rebuked for engaging in sexual immorality. We know what that refers to and we know that it is wrong. This probably had to do with prostitution as part of cultic temple worship.

The Christian sexual ethic is simple and clear. Sex is meant to be enjoyed by a man and woman in the context of marriage. Those ethics haven't changed in two thousand years. They've come under attack. They've been disobeyed. They have been questioned. But we continue to hold this clear sexual ethic.

It has always been one of the distinguishing factors of the Christian church that they held sex in higher regard than the culture around them. Sex was precious, holy, and to be protected. I recently heard Tim Keller describe the Christian sexual ethic as "super duper consensual." You don't just need consent, you need a lifelong covenant.

We still believe that. It can be difficult to obey. But the truth is that our sex life has a lot to do with our spiritual life. We can't separate them.

The second issue mentioned here is a bit different. Meat sacrificed to idols. Even within the New Testament, there are some different instructions on this topic. It seems to be the case that Christians in the New Testament could eat meat that had been sacrificed to an idol in a private home. But they shouldn't participate in the idol worship festival where the meat was sacrificed. That would violate their identity and cross the line.

So the question for us is, when do we cross that line? When do we participate with our culture to such a degree that we have changed our allegiance from the God of the Universe to the gods of the Silicon Valley?

Do we have meat sacrificed to idols in our culture? What about the food sacrificed to corporate idols in the cafeterias of our tech companies? I had the chance to think about this earlier in the week as I was eating food provided to me by the generosity of Microsoft over lunch with someone from PBC.

Think about the first century. They didn't eat meat a lot. Most days they ate the same thing. Bread. A small amount of whatever fruits or vegetables were in season. Olive oil. Fermented grape juice.

The civic feasts had roasted meat and exotic spices. There was entertainment and excited crowds. They were lavish and exciting and the food was rich. It was a culinary highlight. This was where you experienced the rich life. Worshipping the idols was a lavish experience. All your needs were met with extravagance.

Our lives are very different. Our diet is different. But think about the corporate environment around here. The food isn't just free—it's incredible. My friend pointed

out that food has become a competitive weapon for companies in Silicon Valley. Think about how companies treat their employees. We'll wash your car. We'll do your laundry. We'll feed you extravagantly. We'll take care of all your needs.

All we ask in return is... what?

These are hard questions. I'm not telling you not to eat free food from your employers. It's more complicated than that. But we have to ask where we go to meet our deepest needs? Who is it that really takes care of us? Who really has our best interest in mind? Is it the god of the universe? Or the gods of Silicon Valley?

I asked earlier whose thrones are in the Bay Area. Now the question is more personal. Have you bowed down at those thrones? Have you worshipped at the thrones of power in our area?

We must avoid compromise. We must allow the Word of God to pierce our hearts so that we can purify our allegiance to God. The letter continues with one simple word which captures all of us.

Exhortation

Once again, there is a simple exhortation. Things haven't been going well, so you need to stop and change. There's a word for that: repent.

EXHORTATION: Repent

This is part of the regular rhythm of the Christian life. Honest evaluation of how things are going, repentance and prayerful re-orientation. We can't think we've gotten everything right. The Christian walk always involves repentance.

But Jesus will defend his name. If they don't repent, Jesus will come to them and use that sword of his. He will make the truth clear. Jesus' authority is not in danger. The truth is not under attack. Truth will be known.

But it's a lot better to find that line ourselves than to have Jesus come find it for us. This is question we must always be asking: Do we need to repent?

Once again, there are some simple and clear areas where we might need to repent. Maybe some of you are engaged in sexual immorality that you know is wrong. You're holding onto some version of faith, but it has lost its distinction.

Maybe you've given up your identity to the gods of the culture around us. Bought into the optimism of life in Silicon Valley. Bought into the notion that your career is the most important thing about you.

Repenting leads to a kind of freedom. False gods aren't really gods at all. They are prisons we walk into voluntarily. When you repent, you find the freedom you thought you were getting in the first place. Do you need to repent?

NOTICE

Once again, we are reminded that the Spirit will speak. But it's up to us to listen. This standard phrase appears in all of these letters.

NOTICE: let him hear what the Spirit says

If you're hearing something, pay attention. Don't let this opportunity pass you by. Listen to what the Spirit says.

The sad truth is that it's easy to ignore the Spirit. If you sense the Spirit saying something to you and you ignore it, not much will happen. The sun will still rise tomorrow. You'll still wake up and carry on with your day. There don't seem to be any consequences.

But that's where a book like Revelation can help us to wake up. It's easy to get into the patter of ignoring the Spirit. I'm trying to listen more to the Spirit in the little moments of my life. Trying to be obedient even when it makes things messier.

Because there are consequences for ignoring that voice. Not immediately. But there are consequences.

PROMISE

Finally, we get to the promise. This is what awaits those people who hold firm to the truth. It's a beautiful picture.

PROMISE:

Some of the hidden manna
A white stone with a new name

The reward for staying true to Jesus is that all our needs will be met in him. Instead of eating meat sacrificed to idols, we'll receive the holy manna of God's provision. He will give us life to the full. We don't have to cross the line to find it.

We can wait for it. Our needs will be met. We'll have the life God intended. Our call is to be faithful and wait for it.

Instead of engaging in sexual immorality to fulfill our needs for intimacy, Jesus will give us intimacy with him. The white stone is a symbol used in a number of different settings. It could be an admission ticket or a political vote or a vote of innocence in a court of law. The new name which no one knows probably points forward to Revelation 19:12 where Jesus has a name no one knows.

We are given this white stone with the secret name of Jesus on it. We are affirmed, we are admitted, we are forgiven, we are identified, we are included, we have intimacy with Jesus himself. Whatever cheap pleasures we might have been tempted to look for through sexual immorality are fulfilled one hundredfold in Jesus.

All of this might not come right away. We may not experience it to its fullest in this life. But this is what awaits those who walk with Jesus. We aren't sacrificing anything by avoiding those things in our culture which draw us away from God. We are only holding out for something far better.

We cut out the fat so that we can experience the richness of what God intends for us in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

Think back to my opening story about restaurants and farmers markets. We've been thinking about what parts of our culture we can engage in. Maybe you have been convicted about your own life. But that opening story was mostly about how I like to live. But compromising our identity has another, even more significant danger.

All throughout Revelation, the issue at hand is how this church can be a witness to the Gospel of Jesus in the midst of their culture. If we worship at the foot of the cross on Sundays, but worship at the altar of the Silicon Valley good life the rest of the week, what does that say about the power of the Gospel?

The dominant issue for the book of Revelation is witness. How can the church be a faithful witness to the truth of the Gospel in the particular culture around it?

Imagine something for me. Let's say you visit someone's house who has two little children. They are toddlers. You're excited to see them. You bring candy for the little ones. After you arrive, you crouch down and offer it to them. Their eyes get wide. They tear into the wrappers. They gobble down the food. You're almost afraid for your fingers.

When it's gone, they look around desperately for more. They have a weird look in their eyes like they can't stop thinking about that candy. You start to get a weird feeling. It seems like the whole time you're there, they can't stop staring at your pocket. Hoping there might be more.

What is going on in your mind? Aren't you thinking something about the parents? Don't they feed these kids? Don't they take care of them? Why are they so incredibly desperate for something sweet? It's just a piece of candy.

Now think about our world. Think about how people around us see Christians. What happens when we run around desperate for sex at any price? When we sacrifice our integrity for physical pleasure? When we are scratching our way to more power, success, or money? What do people think when they look in our eyes and see the same raw hunger for power and affirmation and purpose and success which fills most of the eyes in the Bay Area?

Don't they conclude that our Father doesn't really take care of us? That faith in Jesus doesn't amount to much if it doesn't take away that desperate craving? If we chase after all those things everyone else is desperate for, what does that say about the Gospel of Jesus?

But when we refuse to worship the idols of our culture, our lives declare something powerful. We have hope and trust and confidence in the God who will meet our needs. We become a witness to a truth bigger than what you see or feel every day. When we wake up, our lives become a light which can help others to see the truth and wake up for themselves.

Satan's throne may not be in the Bay Area, but he sure does have influence here. Pray that the Spirit will help you recognize those lines. May God fill you with the courage to refuse those idols. And may the world around you see and be drawn to the freedom and grace of the Gospel of Jesus.