

Our sermon text today is the third of the seven letters written to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Our text today is from chapter 2, verses 12-17. (Read text)

Fellow children of God,

Normally letters that are over 1900 years old will have more of a historical value than a practical value. You would probably expect to find such letters under lock and key in a museum. But this isn't the case with the series of seven letters which are over 1900 years old and are recorded for us in the book of Revelation. The content of these letters is as fresh and meaningful and practical as if they were written yesterday and sent to us in an email.

Today we are going to hear and study a letter addressed to the church at Pergamum, and will consider the theme: **“The Little Church Next Door To Satan’s Headquarters,”** and like the other letters we have already looked at we will find that it has a very practical lesson to teach us still today.

Jesus begins this letter with this word of instruction, **“These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.”** The picture of the double-edged sword is clearly a reference to the Word of God, with its divine power to penetrate and pierce the hearts of men. To the unbeliever, the Word of God becomes a sword of death unto death, showing him that because of his unrepentant sin and the hardness of his heart, he will be eternally lost. And to the believer, the Word of God becomes a sword of life unto life, assuring him that through Christ his sins are fully and freely forgiven, and heaven is his eternal home.

Our Lord begins this letter by talking about the two edged sword of his Word to make us aware of the fact that we have the means available to us to defeat and overcome Satan, even if he is camping at the doorsteps of our hearts. Our Lord's introduction was particularly fitting for this church at Pergamum, for of all the cities in which our Lord had established churches, Pergamum was probably the most wicked. It was a city that had completely engrossed itself in the wickedness of its culture. It was a city controlled by organized crime. It was a center of heathen worship. It was a city that was set on stamping out the truth of God's Word. No wonder our Lord calls it, **“Satan’s throne.”**

In the first part of this letter Jesus speaks a word of praise for the Christians of Pergamum who were living under very difficult circumstances. He says, **“I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.”** Apparently these believers were not ashamed to be called and known as Christians. They confessed Christ at church and home, in private and public even though they were in the minority, and even though their confession of Christ would likely result in persecution. We have to admire such a faith and pray that God would make all of us little bolder in professing our faith.

For a moment let's focus on the phrase in verse 13 where Jesus said, **“You live where Satan has his throne.”** Whatever this might have specifically referred to in the lives of the Christians at Pergamum, we are all too often unaware of the significance of these words in our own lives. And it is this: that wherever a Christian congregation and family is established, right there next to it the devil is quick to put up his tent. And while it takes architects, carpenters and masons months and sometimes even years to build a church, it takes Satan less than the time it takes to blink your eyes to set up his headquarters next door.

One of the purposes for which we have built our church is to serve as a gathering place to hear God's Word and apply it to our lives. But next to our church Satan has built his invisible house to try and snatch the Word of God out of our hearts before it takes root and bears fruit. You can be sure he is waiting for us today at the door as we return to our different activities in life. And if you came to church today simply out of habit, or if you only listen to God's Word with empty ears and not with your heart, you can be sure the devil will strip you of the Word of God even before you get a chance to use it or apply it to your life. If you only hear God's Word, but don't use it, if it doesn't serve as a daily guide for your life, it isn't doing you any good. But if you receive the Word of God with joy, if you apply it to your life, if you meditate on it daily, if you cling to Jesus in faith, then Satan is defeated even before he starts. And remember that Satan is living in a portable dwelling. He can move from next door to our church, to next door to your home, to your office and your school. It's not enough to have God's Word today and forget about it tomorrow. Either Christ will be your constant companion, or the devil will fill the void. For we never walk alone in this life.

Getting back to the church at Pergamum, our Lord had some very good things to say about it, but not everything was good. Jesus also said in our text, **“Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: 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. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”** Now we could spend quite a bit of

time exploring the false teachings of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans, but instead I will give you a brief summary. These were people who called themselves Christians, and who were in the fellowship of the church at Pergamum, but they were also trying to persuade their fellow members in the church to follow another way other than the one God had given them. They tried to suggest that there wasn't anything wrong with a cautious conformity to the world's standards, and that they should try to compromise in order to conform more with the practices and moral standards of the world. Some of these people may have argued, **"Let's not be so stubborn. We all know that there is some good in all religions. So let's compromise. Let the worshippers of Zeus keep some of their beliefs and practices, let them keep right on committing adultery if they think they can worship their God in that way, as long as they are willing to accept what we teach and believe."** To man's natural way of thinking, such logic may sound good, but it is rotten through and through.

Basically the difference between the teaching of the Balaamites and the Nicolaitans could be put this way. The Balaamites wanted to go out into the world and be a part of it, while the Nicolaitans wanted to bring the world into the church. But both of these teachings were and still are displeasing to the Lord.

So what do we call this false teaching today that Jesus is describing in our text? We could call it worldliness. The church is constantly in danger of mixing with or compromising with the world. Satan tries to weaken the church by mixing it with the world, and the result is that you have a church that is just a big hodgepodge of nothing, that seems to be saying nice things and doing nice things, but it has lost the saving and eternal power of God's Word. You end up with a church that teaches people how to get along in the world with all kinds of worldly ideas, but is completely ineffective in directing the hearts and minds of people to heaven.

This is why Jesus tells us in his Word, **"That even though Christians are in the world they are not of the world,"** and that is really a hard lesson for us to learn. We might illustrate it this way. A ship in the water is a beautiful thing, for a ship is meant to sail on the water. But when the water gets into the ship, it's a different story and it can spell disaster. And so you as a Christian are to go out into the world, to your home and office, to the store and school, to your place in society and you can be a strong witness for Christ there, for that is what God has called you to do. Or you can go out into the world and mix with it, do as it does, go where it goes, sink to the depths it sinks, and all your power as a Christian will soon be gone.

The truth of our text really boils down to this. Do we as a church and as individual Christians take our stand on God's Word, nothing more and nothing less, or do we compromise with the world, do we water down the Word and try to make it more acceptable to men.

To the indifferent, to the compromiser of God's Word, to the worldly-minded who want to practice only an outward shell of religion in their lives, Jesus says in our text, **"Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth."** And remember the same word which God has spoken and recorded for us in the Bible to read and believe, that is the same word which is going to judge every human being on the last day.

On the other hand, there is a glorious future for the individual and the church who says no to the enticements of the world and Satan. Jesus says in our text, **"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."** Jesus is saying you may not have been able to join with the unbelieving world in the pleasures of the flesh, but don't let that get you down because I will give you hidden and heavenly manna, that is the wonderful and eternal joys of heaven. It is called **"hidden manna,"** because the world simply doesn't understand or appreciate it. Jesus also promises us a white stone. This refers to a procedure in the courts in that day when each jury member would give either a white or a black stone to the judge to let the judge know what their verdict was, the black stone meaning guilty and the white stone meaning innocent. And so when the last day comes, God will declare us innocent of any sins through the blood of the Lamb, our Savior Jesus Christ.

Until that promise is fulfilled in eternity, we of course still have a life to be lived on this earth. So how can we continue to live day by day with Satan himself as our next door neighbor? The answer is found in God's Word today, here we have all the weapons we need to fight off Satan's attacks. As Luther said in his battle hymn of the Reformation, **"One little word can fell him."** And that Word is Christ. May God help each of us to become and remain eager hearers and users and doers of His saving Word until the headquarters of Satan on this earth is eternally destroyed, and our permanent home will become the eternal mansions of heaven. Amen.