

Compromised: The Church at Pergamum

Revelation 2:12-17

MPS Jesus is the Righteous Judge who calls His people to repent of sinful compromise and live as faithful witnesses.

OBJ Every person should repent of sinful compromise to believe in Jesus and live as a faithful witness because of the destructive process of compromise.

READ 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. 14But 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. 15So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. 17He 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.’ **Revelation 2:12-17***

Pergamum was located about 50 miles north of Smyrna, sixteen miles inland from the coast. And like Ephesus and Smyrna, it had its own distinctives that set it apart as a city of notoriety, becoming known in Second Century B.C. as “the finest flower of Hellenic civilization.”¹ Politically, it served as the capital of the Roman province since that period. Culturally, one of its greatest boasts was of its library, which was “said to have contained more than 200,000 parchment scrolls. Indeed, our word ‘parchment’ is derived from this name ‘Pergamum’.”² “Legend has it that parchment was invented there when the supply of papyrus from Egypt was cut off in reprisal for Eumenes’s attempt to lure a famous librarian by the name of Aristophanes away from Alexandria.”³ But maybe its greatest claim was its great religious plurality, serving as the home for many temples and altars.

Pergamum was a city set in the shadow of religious plurality. Rising over 1,000’ above the surrounding plains⁴, this mountain housed worship to many gods, and many Roman emperors. “Pergamum was the first city in Asia Minor to build a temple for emperor worship.”⁵ It became “the first among the seven cities addressed by Revelation to become the neokoros (the “temple warden”) of an imperial cult.”⁶ The temple to Athena (Athena Nikephoros, “Victory-Bearer”)...was perhaps the most important religious site for the city, as she is part of the mythology of Pergamum’s origins. Athena’s namesake is still held very high today as it is carried around on the feet of many by the Nike Swoosh. The temple of Dionysius, patron god of arts and theatre, is located next to the theatre and is among the best preserved ruins of ancient Pergamum. The Asclepion—the shrine of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing—functioned as a combined sanctuary, spa, and hospital. It included numerous healing pools, sacred spring, and mud treatments. The cult of Asclepius was so popular in Pergamum that the serpent, the symbol of Asclepius, became one of the emblems of the city,⁷ as noted on their coins, called the “cistophorus”. Next to the Asclepion, “Sanatoria were attached to the temples where the sick were laid in the hope that one

¹ Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 78. Under Eumenes II (197–159 B.C.).

² Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 69.

³ Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 78.

⁴ Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#), 78. Mounce notes, “Pliny called Pergamum ‘by far the most distinguished city in Asia.’ Built on a cone-shaped hill a thousand feet in height, it dominated the surrounding valley of the Caicus. Its very name in Greek (Pergamon) means ‘citadel.’”

⁵ G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, [Revelation: A Shorter Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 65.

⁶ David A. deSilva, [Breaking the Code Revised Edition: Understanding the Book of Revelation](#) (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

⁷ Külli Tõniste, “[Pergamum](#),” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016). Details on these gods were taken from here.



of the sacred snakes would touch and heal them.”⁸ The symbol of Asclepius is still used today with the serpent as the insignia of medical associations.⁹

TRANS But the throne to Zeus is awe-inspiring as it is fear-inducing, to capture the culture of Pergamum’s polytheism.

ILLUS **Picture of Zeus throne** “Prominently set on a terrace near the top of the hill stood an immense altar to Zeus. The altar stood on a huge platform surrounded by colonnades, and the whole structure looked like an enormous throne. On this platform, animal sacrifices were burned twenty-four hours a day by a constantly changing team of priests. The overpowering smell of burning animal flesh permeated the air in Pergamum, and all day long a column of smoke could be seen from miles around, serving to keep the supremacy of Zeus ever in the public eye.”¹⁰ That’s an image you can almost smell.

I summarize the immensity of religious practice to emphasize Pergamum’s great devotion to polytheism, which earned the city the infamous home to “Satan’s throne” (Rev 2:13).¹¹ And because of the vast pluralism, hostility to the church was determined and more vicious in Pergamum than in many other towns.¹² And though they live where Satan’s throne resides, some have held fast to the faith. Antipas is identified as a faithful witness who was killed among them, potentially by sacrifice too.¹³ Jesus is worthy and calls His church to live as a faithful witness.

Jesus is the Righteous Judge who calls His people to repent of sinful compromise and live as faithful witnesses.

The Church at Pergamum consisted of people who were “converts...from paganism, and undoubtedly the social and religious pressure to abandon Christ and to turn back to their pagan worship was severe.” **Holding true and faithful to One God is no small matter when you consider the daily pressure to join everyone around you in worshiping what feels so good, seems so right, and appears as so normal, common, and beneficial.**

Two false teachings permeated the church. The first is the teaching of Balaam. In Numbers 22–24, Balaam appeared to be a true prophet who refused to utter a curse against Israel, but later (Numb 31:16) was blamed for Israel’s idolatry and immorality.¹⁴ Though a prominent ancient figure, he “was believed to have led Israel to eat meat offered to idols and to have sexual intercourse with pagans to whom they were not married (Num 25:1–3).”¹⁵ This became a prominent topic of debate for Paul, to which he addressed in his first letter to the church in Corinth. The issue was whether people could eat meat purchased in the market, because it was part of the animals originally dedicated to false idols, but not used in the burning on the altars. The teaching of Balaam either dismissed or intentionally led people to participate. After all, who doesn’t like a finely cooked steak! In reaction, others mandated strict avoidance of this meat. Paul countered that it depends on one’s knowledge and heart motivation, which comprises one’s conscience, and that a real Christ-follower will also be mindful of their influence on others to not become a stumbling block (1 Cor 8). The church of Pergamum would have been familiar with Balaam because his name “became a biblical catchword for false teachers who for financial gain sought to influence God’s

⁸ David A. deSilva, [Breaking the Code Revised Edition: Understanding the Book of Revelation](#). DeSilva notes, “The serpent was Asclepius’s symbol, and it is still depicted in the caduceus, the insignia of medical associations.”

⁹ David A. deSilva, [Breaking the Code Revised Edition: Understanding the Book of Revelation](#). DeSilva notes, “The serpent was Asclepius’s symbol, and it is still depicted in the caduceus, the insignia of medical associations.”

¹⁰ David A. deSilva, [Breaking the Code Revised Edition: Understanding the Book of Revelation](#).

¹¹ J. Ramsey Michaels, [Revelation](#), vol. 20, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Re 2:12–17. Michaels notes, “One reason often suggested for this statement is that Pergamum housed a famous temple to Asklepius, the Greek god of healing, symbolized by the figure of a snake (Finegan 1981:173). An evil dragon in one of John’s later visions is labeled “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (12:9; compare 20:2). Another possible reason for placing Satan in Pergamum is that Antipas, possibly the first Christian martyr in Asia, was killed there.” David A. deSilva also notes, “This remains the likeliest landmark that the Glorified Christ had in mind when he spoke of “Satan’s throne” (2:13).”

¹² David A. deSilva, [Breaking the Code Revised Edition: Understanding the Book of Revelation](#).

¹³ Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, 71. Morris notes, “Nothing more is known of Antipas (though legend has it that he was roasted in a brazen bull).”

¹⁴ J. Ramsey Michaels, [Revelation](#), vol. 20, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Re 2:12–17.

¹⁵ Craig S. Keener, [The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Re 2:14–15.



people to engage in ungodly practices (Deut. 23:4; Neh. 13:2; 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11).¹⁶ The **second false teaching was that of the Nicolaitans**, of which we have already been introduced in 2:7. The Nicolaitans advocated love of people over doctrine, leading to heretical teaching then, even as it still does today, and in turn is no real love at all. These two teachings became so prevalent and closely aligned that they were almost impossible to distinguish.¹⁷ **The teaching of Balaam was a strong temptation because it promised the best food and an ultimate pleasure experience by sexual indulgence. And the teaching of the Nicolaitans advocated to embrace it all as love for people.**

TRANS “In our text Balaam is a prototype of those who promote compromise with paganism in idolatry and immorality.¹⁸ The great spiritual issue ravaging the church at Pergamum against which Jesus warns was one of compromise with the culture. **Compromise makes sin so common that it cannot be denied.** Therefore, there is only one right response.

Jesus tells the church in Pergamum to repent of their sinful compromise. And if they will not repent, He will “come soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”(2:16) The One who speaks has the sharp, two-edged sword, and calls the church to repent. There is no doubt the church would have also remembered that “Balaam was originally threatened with the sword in the angel’s hand...(Num. 22:23, 31) and was eventually killed by the sword for his evil-doing (Num. 31:8).”¹⁹ There were some who stood as a faithful witness, like Antipas. But their community had been compromised by idolatry and sexual immorality. **Jesus stands over them to judge their sin soon for the one who will not repent.**²⁰

Jesus offers His strong, life-changing promise for those who repent. The one who believes in Jesus and repents conquers sin. Jesus will give “hidden manna”, a reference of God’s heavenly provision to satisfy the appetite of desire and the need of hunger with that which is beyond and greater than this world. He also promises a “white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it”. White stones were used in a number of ways, as an instrument of acquittal when declared innocent of wrongdoing, representing a spiritual judgment as righteous.²¹ White stones were also used a ticket for entry. Those who held a white stone would be welcomed to Jesus’ great banquet feast. And this is guaranteed because the stone will have a name written on it, which signified a new identity²², a whole new person.²³ And that new identity would be known by the one who received the stone. Those who fall prey and compromise to false teachings will be judged by Jesus, in truth and righteousness. But those who repent will receive the full reward He

¹⁶ G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, [Revelation: A Shorter Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 66.

¹⁷ J. Ramsey Michaels, [Revelation](#), vol. 20, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Re 2:12–17. Michaels notes, The “Balaamites” and the “Nicolaitans” at Pergamum are almost certainly not two groups but one, “Nicolaitans” being a coined nickname based on what some believed to be the Greek equivalent of “Balaam.” The latter, in Hebrew, could be read as “master of the people” (ba.al .am), while “Nicolaitan” in Greek could be read as “conqueror of the people.”

¹⁸ George Eldon Ladd, [A Commentary on the Revelation of John](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 47.

¹⁹ G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, [Revelation: A Shorter Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 67.

²⁰ G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, [Revelation: A Shorter Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 65. Beale notes, “This means that the idea of Christ standing over the church as a threatening judge because of their sin is the thought pervading the entire letter to Pergamum.”

²¹ George Eldon Ladd, [A Commentary on the Revelation of John](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 49. Ladd states, A white stone signified acquittal by a jury, a black stone condemnation. White stones were used as tickets of admission to public festivals. This meaning fits the context best. The white stone is a symbol of admission to the messianic feast.”

²² G. K. Beale and David H. Campbell, [Revelation: A Shorter Commentary](#) (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 69. Beale notes, “To be given a new name was an indication of a new status.”

²³ Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 73. Morris elaborates, “But in antiquity the name was widely held to sum up what the man stood for. It represented his character. It stood for the whole man. Here then the new name represents a new character. The fact that no-one knows it would be a crippling disadvantage for us. In the modern world what is the use of a name that nobody knows? But for people of antiquity the hidden name was precious. It meant that God had given the overcomer a new character which no-one knew except himself. It was not public property. It was a little secret between him and his God.”



promises. The white stone Jesus promised to the one who repents is the “ticket” to His eternal, heavenly blessing because they had been judged righteous before God!²⁴

Jesus is the Righteous Judge who calls His people to repent of sinful compromise and live as faithful witnesses.

COMPROMISE never serves one well in relationship with God. Compromise occurs when God’s Word says one thing, but we settle for, cut short, or substitute another to gain favor, status, pleasure, or riches. Compromise doesn’t happen all at once. You don’t wake up one day and say, “Today’s the day I’m going to compromise.” **But in all ways, Compromise is always determined by a choice we make.**

OBJ Jesus calls people to repent and live as a faithful witness because of the destructive process of compromise.

Compromise is a process motivated by personal benefit or gain, initiated through a pattern of thinking that culminates in choices made and produces an unhelpful, and undesirable end.

The Process of Compromise begins with Four Main Motivations.

1. **Convenience** motivates us to compromise because it just seems easier to do so.
2. **Advantage** motivates us to compromise because of the promise to get something or get positioned somewhere to help or aid us in some situation or way.
3. **Advancement** motivates us to compromise because it feels or seems as though it will help us get further down the road to our goal faster.
4. **Pleasure** motivates us to compromise because we want to indulge it. Pleasure is most motivating when we are impatient, demanding, and selfish, so we tell ourselves, “I want it.” It is strongest when we are weary and tired, and our defenses are weak, or discernment is low, so we rationalize by saying, “I deserve it.” When we are threatened or sense fear, and want comfort and security, we justify it by saying, “But I need it.” And when we have not achieved a goal or earned a reward, we seek to save ourselves by, “But I’ve earned it.”

Any of these motivations may present themselves through money, power, or notoriety, and all seem to be accompanied by security and satisfaction, when in fact they ultimately deny you those very things.

The Process of COMPROMISE advances by a question posed at each step along the path. The first question, “**What’s so wrong about this?**”, raises any **moral** value to reduce its relevancy. Second, “**What harm could there be?**” addresses any **ethical** issue to answer it by, “I’m not going to hurt anyone else.” Third, “**How bad could this really be?**” asks a **personalized** question, for both spiritual and physical reasons, so we can answer, “People don’t understand my situation, how much I need this.” Finally, “**Does God’s Word really say anything about or matter for this?**” forms a **Biblical** question, whereby we (seemingly) remove the necessity of God’s command to substitute our own desire or want. **Ultimately, the process of compromise thrusts us back in the Garden to be faced with the Adversary’s question that leads to our choice to sin.**

The Process of COMPROMISE damages and destroys because of what it produces. Compromise short-circuits healthy process to miss the value of growth and maturity. Hebrews 5:8 says that Jesus “*learned obedience through what He suffered*”. James 1:2-4 teaches that maturity comes through a process. Compromise produces one who fails to learn the value of obedience and mature because they short-circuited the process. But the problem is not yet known, because compromise creates a false sense of identity, worth, and value. Because of this, compromise produces a false sense of security, making one think they have and are what in fact they are not and do not have. Finally, it leads to destruction because it satisfies genuine need with false hope that deceives. Compromise is seldom exposed until it’s too late. **Compromise teaches, trains, reinforces that problems and temptations can be coddled with false hopes justified by wrong beliefs that tolerate to accept and justify sinful actions that condemn.**

²⁴ Leon Morris, [Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary](#), vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 72. Morris states, “We simply do not know what the white stone signified, though clearly it did convey some assurance of blessing.”



Compromised beliefs always produce compromise in actions. Where you entertain wrong thinking, thinking that is not what God's Word says, that is not aligned with, in accordance with, nor following the pattern according to the teaching of God's Word, you always end up indulging sinful behavior. And sinful behavior always fuels more compromised thinking and behavior with even more readiness the next time. But compromise does not have to have the last word. **For the Spirit of God shines the light of God's truth on the dark process of compromise to bring conviction unto repentance.**

*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. ¹³And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. **Hebrews 4:12***

APPL Are you compromising anywhere in your life, in your relationship with God, your marriage, home and family life, job? Before you answer that question in your mind, FIRST ask Holy Spirit to answer it in your heart.

Jesus is the Righteous Judge who calls His people to repent of sinful compromise and live as faithful witnesses.

Let me tell you what Compromise can't do. Compromise can NEVER get you a white stone, will never get you a new name and identity by which you are known as righteous before God, and will never get you into the banquet of Heaven where you will feast with God and all His children for eternity. But Jesus can, and Jesus will; He has a white stone to write your new name on it!

Compromise WILL bring you face-to-face with Jesus, holding His sword of judgement, every single time.

