

10 October, 1999
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church
Mark James Toone

You've Got Mail: Overcoming Idolatry *Revelation 2:12-17*

As you know, my wife is with other women of the church on retreat. I'm "batching" it, along with about 75 other men. Do you know what I decided to do for a treat for the three of us? I made a peach cobbler. That's right, the man you all call "Macho Pastor," --I know that's your nickname for me--made a peach cobbler. I am remarkably in touch with my feminine side. I wasn't entirely satisfied with the product. My crust was too thin and my filling was too runny. But it tasted good to me. Neither of the kids thought that it was much of a treat, however. Rachel ate about two bites, quickly took the bowl to the sink and said, "I think I need to be a little older before I try this."

If you had been a Roman postal carrier in the first century AD, your route would have started in Ephesus, proceeded north 35 miles to Smyrna on the coastline, proceeded another 40 miles north and then turned inland about ten miles up a river valley until you arrived at the impressive capital city of Pergamum. Pergamum, which means "citadel" in Greek, was built on a cone shaped hill 1000 feet in elevation. It was an imposing site. As you approached up the river valley you saw, towering above you, a great terrace jutting out from the mountain, a huge flat area on which was built many glorious temples. Pergamum was the center of the cult of emperor worship, the belief that the caesars were gods. In 29 BC, Pergamum constructed the first temple to a living caesar, Augustus, who was reigning when Jesus was born.

There are two things you need to know that will make this text come alive for you. First, as the capital of provincial Asia, Pergamum was considered the seat or throne of Roman authority in the east. Second, the proconsul of a capital city had the right to carry out executions at his will without question. It was called "ius gladii"---the right of the sword. Think of those two things as we listen to the text.

"Ius gladii...the right of the sword." The seat of the Roman government in Asia. Knowing these two things, do you see how the imagery in this vision makes more sense? Pergamum was perched like a throne upon a hill; it was the seat of Roman authority. But who is it, according to Jesus, that sits on that throne? Satan. He says so twice in verse 13.

And how does Jesus introduce himself in this letter? To the Pergamum church, the seat of Roman authority, the heart of emperor worship, the emblem of Roman power, the home of the ruler who wields "ius gladii," the right of the sword--- how does Jesus appear? **He** is the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword. In fact, he mentions it twice. He will bring judgment and his judgment will be true.

But what is there to judge? Let's see. Now that Jesus has introduced himself, he has words for the church at Pergamum. First, words of encouragement. He praises them for their courage in the face of tremendous persecution. Here they were, in the center of emperor worship. It isn't hard to imagine that they might run headlong into trouble. And that's exactly what happened. One of their number had even been martyred. His name was Antipas. We know little about this brave man. But apparently, when he was ordered to light incense and declare "Caesar is lord," as all Roman citizens were expected to do, his faith in Jesus would not allow it. And he was executed, in an awfully gruesome way. Tradition says that he was placed in a large brazen bowl, a fire built underneath it and he was slowly roasted to death.

So Jesus affirms their courage in the face of martyrdom, but what does he condemn? Verse 14: "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people who hold to the teaching of Balaam." Who was Balaam? Remember the guy with the talking donkey? The story starts in Numbers 22. Balaam was a prophet who was hired by the Moabite king, Balak, to pronounce a curse on the Israelite army. Balaam prayed and the Lord told him he could not pronounce a curse on the Israelites. In fact, Balaam ended up blessing them.

But Balak wouldn't give up. He kept asking Balaam to try again. "Come over here and look at this part of the army. Can you curse them?" Balaam would come and pray a blessing instead of a curse. Balak would be furious. He repeated it. "Come over here

and look at this part. Can you curse this part?" In the end, Balaam never did curse the Israelites. But what he did was worse. Apparently he convinced Balak to entice the Israelite men with Moabite women and thereby draw them into the worship of their idols. That's exactly what happened. The men were seduced, they began worshipping idols, and 24,000 of them died in a plague of judgment from God.

When Jesus condemns the church of Pergamum for tolerating the teaching of Balaam, he is saying, "Listen, there are some in your midst who are teaching lies. They are persuading you to participate in temple prostitution while at the same time worshipping me. They are persuading you to eat food sacrificed to idols with the same mouths that feast upon my Eucharist. Like Balaam, they are allowing this pagan culture to bleed into your lives and your faith to the point that you are no longer worshipping me alone. You are sharing my devotion with pagan idols. And I will not tolerate it. If you think your Roman leaders have the power of the sword, wait until I come and fight against this apostasy with the sword of my mouth!"

The church at Pergamum was threatened by a creeping idolatry. Bit by bit, they were beginning to wink at pagan religions. Bit by bit, they were allowing elements of that idolatry to seep into their Christian faith. Bit by bit they were compromising the gospel away, exchanging it for the idolatrous and immoral worship of emperors who weren't even good human beings, much less divine.

Idolatry. So what does this package of licorice pieces have to do with idolatry? The other night I went to our favorite junk food cupboard and pulled out a package of licorice pieces just like this. They weren't like these. They were from Scotland, a gift from our friend Marjory when she came over last summer. I didn't even know you could buy them in town so I have been rationing them out, making them last. But I was in the mood for Bassett's Licorice Allsorts, so I grabbed the bag out of the cupboard and began scarfing them down. By the time I got downstairs I had probably downed three or four. I ate a few more as I watched TV, not paying attention to what I was doing----

Until I noticed, as I moved another piece toward my mouth, that there was something hanging from it. I thought it was just a piece of white lint ...until it started to lower itself down from the silken

thread by which it was suspended from my licorice bit. It was a white maggot. I thought I was going to puke! I can see that some of you are thinking about it. I couldn't tell this story on a communion Sunday or none of us would come forward.

Now you are REALLY wondering what these Bassett's Licorice Allsorts has to do with anything. Idolatry is very much like my licorice snacks. We think we are partaking of something that is tasty and good when, in fact, we are filling ourselves with garbage, a rotten, wormy substitute for the real thing.

Now you might be tempted to say, "I'm no idolater. I believe in Jesus. You won't find any idols on my fireplace mantle." Maybe not, but how about in your garage? At your club? On your building site. I believe that the United States of America is the most idolatrous nation in the history of the world. Our unprecedented power and prosperity has made it almost impossible for us American Christians to worship the Lord our God alone without finding our affection and adoration being drawn to other things.

We make wormy little idols of our recreation. There's nothing wrong with a game of golf or tennis. Nothing wrong with taking in a football game. But we are a culture that is absorbed with sports. The amount of money we spend on sports is ludicrous. Did you see that the new Houston expansion football team went for a cool \$700 million dollars? Of course, they'll have to build a new stadium to house them. And the salaries we are willing to pay our athletes are frankly obscene. I hope Joey Galloway sits out the rest of his career.

And we are passing the obsession on to our children. I want my kids to play sports. Rachel is playing soccer right now. But the level of expectation that we place on our kids is crazy. And I find it outrageous that some sports leagues brazenly schedule games on Sunday mornings and would consider you a religious fanatic if you objected that your kids need to be in church on Sunday morning and not on the play field.

We make wormy idols of our careers. We neglect the only people on earth that are truly worthy of our devotion and adoration to pour our lives into companies that are just as likely as not to fire you next year. We come home from business trips to discover

that our little girls are now buying prom dresses ...and somehow we missed about ten years of their lives.

We make idols of our celebrities. Have you ever really paid attention to the pretty faces that grace the pages of "People" magazine? Most of them are pathetic, oversexed, underweight airheads who have trouble stringing together two intelligent sentences and whose private lives are constantly screwed up. Are these pitiful creatures ...these rock stars and actors ..really deserving of our adoration?

But the juiciest maggot on which we like to nibble in this country is materialism. We really believe that we can buy our happiness. And boy are we trying! The last statistics I saw indicated that the average American spends something like 115% of their income. Many have been sucked into a black hole of credit card debt out of which they cannot extricate themselves, all in pursuit of the foolish belief that a new car, a new house, a new wardrobe, a new **something**, is really what I need to be happy. It is a lie. It is idolatrous. There is nothing you own that will not end up in a junkyard. Think about that.

The all-church questionnaire you completed indicated that we give, on average, 2.5% of our income to the work of the Lord here at Chapel Hill. That is actually high on a national average. Compared to other churches our size, we are doing pretty well. The problem is, compared to the Biblical standard, we aren't doing so hot. What is the Biblical standard? The tithe. Ten per cent of your income...off the top. Both the Old and New Testaments affirm this wonderful news. God gives us everything we have, lets us keep 90% of it, and asks us to give ten per cent back to him as an expression of our love and worship. Now, since Cyndi and I are giving more than a tithe, somebody's not carrying their weight!

But as tempting as it might be to tell you the difference it would make to the ministries of this church if everyone of us was a tither---if everyone was even a five per-center--I will leave that to Sam Gott and other elders for another time. The point of this message is not how much the church has to receive in order that it can function. The point is **how much we have to give in order that we can function**. When our material possessions mean more to us than our devotion and obedience to God, we have become idol worshippers. We are chewing on maggots.

But there is an out. Jesus offers a promise, as he does to most of the churches. To the overcomers, he promises two things. "Hidden manna" and a white stone with a new name on it. This is a little strange, isn't it? What does it mean? Well, you remember what manna was. Manna was the bread from heaven given miraculously by God to feed the people of Israel during their wanderings. A jar of manna was collected and placed inside the Ark of the Covenant. Jewish tradition taught that when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem in the 6th century B.C., Jeremiah took the jar of manna and hid it somewhere underneath Mt. Nebo. And when the Messiah returned, it would be rediscovered and replaced in the new temple in Jerusalem.

The white stone is tougher. There are several possibilities. During this time, white stones called *tessera* were given out as tokens and were used for different reasons: admission into a banquet or to claim your proper supply of corn. A tessera was also given to gladiators who had won and were allowed to retire.

I wonder if, taken together, the image of the "hidden manna" and the white stone with a secret name on it might be saying the same thing. And it is this: Jesus says, "Please don't settle for the unclean, rotten food of idolatry. It cannot sustain you. It will only destroy you. If you trust in me, I will provide you with everything you need to sustain you, both on this earth and in the life to come. Why settle for maggots when you can have manna?"

Why indeed? To what are you giving allegiance and adoration that ought to belong to Jesus? In what way have you allowed the influence of this world to water down your faith? How have you compromised the purity of your relationship with Jesus? Perhaps it's time to make things right?

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
OVERCOMING IDOLATRY
Revelation 2:12-17

October 10, 1999
Pastor Mark Toone

- Review the introductions of Jesus in each letter so far. (2.1, 8, 12) These are all drawn from the great vision of Christ in the first chapter. How is each introduction suited to the particular needs or situation of the church being addressed?
- Notice in verse 13 Jesus says, "I know where you live," and at the end of the same verse he concludes with "where Satan lives." In what way do we live in the place that Satan does? What principles might we draw from this realization?
- Balaam's story (Numbers 22-25, 31: 15-16) is the story of a prophet who tried to compromise God's word, little by little. His influence resulted in the death of thousands in chapter 25. In what way is the Christian gospel being compromised in this country? How can we avoid/reverse this?
- What is your idol? What is the thing that receives more devotion and attention than it deserves...and displaces some of your devotion for Christ?
- Pray about these things together.

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