



TIME OF GRACE®

Jesus Judges Churches Too: Do We Compromise Sexual Morality?

Study Notes

Summary

Despite severe pressure, the church at Pergamum did not deny the name of Jesus . . . but it did compromise its standards. Churches today face the same temptation, to believe that they are being faithful to Christ while subtly compromising their values. This message calls us to repent, hold to all God's standards, and trust that Jesus is well worth it.

- **Revelation 2:12** To the angel^[a] of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.
- **Revelation 2:13** ¹³ 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, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

The Good = _____.

- **Revelation 2:14-16** ¹⁴ Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: 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. ¹⁵ Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

The Bad = _____.

Sex is = _____.

- Revelation 2:17 ¹⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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.

Points to Ponder

1. Look at your upcoming summer schedule. What would it take to finish the summer without missing a weekend of worship? Does your church offer multiple service options?
2. Evaluate: Our church is a safe place to talk about personal sexual struggles.
3. Review the three letters we have studied so far in this series (Revelation 2:1-17). What themes do you see that often caught the eye of Jesus?
4. What motivates you the most to give generously of the money that God has placed in your hands? How is Jesus' generous love, as compared to other motivations, the most constant source to sustain your fire for giving over the years to come?
5. Spend five minutes in a prayer for the good news of Jesus to be believed around the world.

Homework for Next Week

Read I Peter 2:23 to I Peter 3:12

Time of Grace Ministry
Jesus Judges Churches Too: Do We Compromise Sexual Morality?
Revelation 2:12-16
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Pastor Mike Novotny

We try our best to be a Bible teaching church. And if you actually read the Bible cover to cover, you would find out that in the Old Testament and the New, our perfect Father in heaven was not shy and he was not sheepish about the topic of sex. The prophets weren't. The apostles weren't. The Father wasn't. The Spirit wasn't. Jesus, in his own ministry, wasn't. And so we feel it's important just to be honest, to be candid. and to be Biblical.

In fact, in this sermon series as we study these letters that Jesus wrote in Revelation 2 and 3, did you know that there's one topic that comes up in the first letter and the third and the fourth letter. The only topic repeated by Jesus that many times and the topic is, yeah, you guessed it. The truth is though, even if Jesus didn't talk about it that much, as a pastor of this church I would still feel compelled to talk about it often. Because the longer the years go by and the more I get to know you, the more you communicate with me there online or on TV. And you send in your letters from your homes, from your prison cell. I realize that sex is something as awkward as it can be that intercepts with all of our lives.

I recently read from author Peggy Orenstein that the average American teenager is exposed to 14,000 sexualized messages a year. Fourteen thousand. And yet in her very same research she did in depth interviews with 70 young women and asked them, among the many questions, how many of you ever had a real conversation about sex with your own father? Out of the 70 young women who were absorbing 14,000 messages about sex each year, how many out of 70 every talked with their own dad? Two. In her research Orenstein also found that at that time, 92% of the top songs on the billboard charts mentioned or were focused on sex. This is before a 20/20 survey came out that said one in six young adults in America between the ages of 18 and 24 now identify as LGBTQ. And just in case you didn't know, pornography is still a thing. It's out there. And I don't have to tell most of you it's not just out there, it's in here.

As a praise-singing, Bible-reading, Jesus-adoring, church family you and I talk about this behind closed doors a lot. Don't we? You're struggling with pornography, and you don't know how to escape it and you need help. You're questioning your sexual identity, orientation. You need guidance and shepherding. You want to know what God really wants you to do. And you send me the email. Your marriage is struggling. Maybe it's gotten to the point of an affair. Maybe you can just see it drifting in that direction. And you want to do things God's way. So, we're going to be in Revelation 2. It says, "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 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, not even the days of Antiphas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-where Satan lives."

Some early church traditions says that Antiphas would not bow the knee and worship the Gods of Rome. So as a consequence, they boiled him alive in a bronze kettle. Can you imagine? And yet the pastor of the church saw it and yet he did not let go of Jesus. You catch those words? He says, I know where you live and yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me. Not even in the days of Antiphas. Like, this pastor might be next. He might be threatened. He might be tortured. He might be boiled alive. He might be crucified. He might be thrown to the beast and yet he refused to compromise his faith. Write this down. Here's the good thing that Jesus has to say to this pastor and his church. The good was the pastor's personal courage. You could threaten him, you could accuse him, you could drag him to court, he wasn't letting go of Jesus. He was personally courageous.

Kind of think of it like this, this giant Lego. Let's imagine this giant red Lego was Jesus. Which is why I wrote 'Jesus' on it. This pastor, he thought of Jesus in such a big and beautiful and glorious way, that he was going to hold on to Jesus no matter what anyone said or did. Like a slap on the wrist, he's not going to let go of Jesus. A lash across the back, he's not letting go of Jesus. You could tie him to a stake, set him on fire. Just tell him all he has to do is drop Jesus, he's not letting go of Jesus. What he had found in the son of God was so beautiful and glorious that nothing in this life was worth letting him go. When I was a total mess, there was Jesus. When I went through my divorce and was just off the rails morally, there was Jesus. When I wandered and strayed from church, from the Bible, from prayer, from my values, there was Jesus. And that is my prayer. That you pay so much attention to the words of this book, to the lyrics of these songs, to the prayers that we pray, that in the end you don't just leave with the melodies in your head. You leave with this kind of Jesus in your heart. That was the good.

But it wasn't all good for the pastor of Pergamum. Jesus continues, "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: 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 teachings of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." Now did you catch what made Jesus so mad? It's fascinating. It wasn't what the pastor did. And it wasn't what the pastor believed. It's what the pastor permitted. What Jesus says in these words is so anti-American, you might have missed it when I said it. He said, Pastor, I hold this against you that there are some people among you who hold to the teaching of those people.

If you've always thought that your personal beliefs are none of the pastor's business, you don't agree with Jesus. If you think church is about giving an offering and then the pastor can give you counseling when you need it, but otherwise you're going to do you, you don't agree with Jesus. Apparently, Jesus says that I am not just supposed to get a salary and a little bit of authority here, but I have a deep responsibility to make sure you hold to the teaching of Jesus. Catch that? He said it twice. Some people among you hold to the teaching of Balaam. Some of you hold to teaching of the Nicolaitans and Pastor, that is not okay with me, Jesus says. So what is he talking about? It's a little bit deep. Super contextual. So if you're new to the church, the Bible, you got to turn up your brain power for about 3 minutes okay. With me?

Balaam was a guy who lived about 1,500 years before Jesus wrote this letter. You can read all about him early in the Bible in the book of Numbers. He was essentially a prophet for hire that you could pay. And Balaam would come and he would either bless you or he would curse them. And that's exactly what an ancient King named Balak wanted to happen. In the days of Moses, the people of Israel were marching towards Balak and his kingdom and he freaked. He needed these people to be cursed before they took over his land. So Balak pays Balaam and has him come to curse the people of Israel but Balaam won't. He says that God won't let him pronounce this curse. In fact, he just blesses Moses and the people of Israel. Then he does it again. And he does it a third time. Then he does it a fourth time. And he's not going to get paid, and he's about to leave until he leans over to Balak and he says, "Sex." And in Numbers 24, Balaam takes off back to his hometown. And Balak knows the perfect way to get to Moses's people. Sex. They seduce the Israelites. They invite them to worship their fertility gods. Sacrifice animals. They have a big feast and then they throw off the rails and the boundaries and the ten commandments. And they indulge in the sins of the flesh.

And apparently in Pergamum the same thing was happening. People were breaking the commandments. They weren't doing what the God of Israel had said. The pastor knew about it, but he smiled and he prayed for the people and he didn't say a word. And the Nicolaitans were much the same. As best as scholars can suggest, there seemed to be this guy named Nicolaus in the first century who gathered enough of a following that they called his people the Nicolaitans. And Nicolaus said that you could have your sex and have your savior too. Like if Jesus forgives then he'll forgive it, right? And if his love is unconditional then you don't have to worry about any of that, right. And if he saves us from everything then you're saved, right. So, yeah, you're fine. You're going to heaven. You got Jesus, so just do whatever; and he'll take care of it. And there were some people who didn't just struggle with that, in the text it says they held to that teaching. That's what they believed too. And the pastor preached. And he prayed. And he permitted. And Jesus judged him. Write this down. The bad that Jesus saw in the church of Pergamum is what I'll call relational cowardice. The pastor himself had personal courage but not when it came to the church.

Alright, so what do you think Jesus would say to me? Or to the pastoral staff at our church. What he'd say about us today? Would he repeat the same praise and the same critique? Are we better? Are we worse? Let's dig into that for a few minutes together. Let me start with just the basic definition of Biblical sexual morality. I'd like for you to fill in this blank for me. Sex is in the Bible -- let me condense all the teaching on it. Sex is essentially this, God's gift to husband and wife. I don't have 100 passages to prove it but I could. Sex is God's gift to husband and wife. And I mean every single word of that. Sex is God's gift. If you don't think sex is an inherently good thing. If you're like sheepish and awkward and embarrassed, you are not Biblical.

The very beginning of sex happens before sin was even a thing. Before there was sin in Genesis 3 there was sex in Genesis 1 and 2. Adam and his wife Eve were naked the Bible says and they were unashamed. The Bible talks frequently about the joy of sex and the pleasure of sex. I dare you to read Proverbs 5 after church is done in the car and see if the kids in the back don't giggle just a little bit. There's a celebration of our bodies. The creator who made them. The one who designed nerve endings and pleasure. And the ecstasy that sex can be when it is done well.

But the very start of the definition of the Bible is not a don't or shall not. It's a good Father who wraps up this incredible wedding gift and gives it to every husband and every wife. It's God's gift. And it's a gift for just two. Right. It's not a God's gift to a husband and his wives. Polygamy. It's not a gift to husbands and wives and polyamory. It's not a gift to a man or woman and their digital partners through pornography. It's meant to be the two becoming one flesh. And it's husband, not boyfriend, not friend with benefits. Not we're engaged and God already knows our hearts. God says it's only after a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife that the two become one flesh. And as you may have seen, it's not a husband and his partner or significant other. It's husband and his wife. One man, one woman in the covenant called marriage. That's good sex according to God.

I was a virgin until my wedding night. Kind of. Many of you know that a long, long struggle with pornography was part of my story even though I was a church-going, dinner-table praying, ministry-studying kind of kid. It's hard to wait. And honestly, if it wasn't for Kim's self-control and her spiritual strength, her good boundaries, I probably couldn't say that I would've have made it to the finish line. I get it. And most of our church family does too. And for a whole bunch of reasons this is one of the hardest things in the Bible to obey. Like I'm coming to church every Sunday. I'm giving an offering. I get up 5 minutes early. But to be self-controlled, to embrace everything, that is so, so difficult.

For some of you, the difficult part of this teaching is believing that it's God's gift. Maybe you grew up in one of those homes where your parents were cowards. They were so scared about the talk that they left you defenseless and ignorant in a world where Satan was so ready to peddle his lies and half truths about your body. Or maybe you grew up in one of those churches where sex was talked about but just don't, don't, don't. Wait, wait. Don't. Wait. Don't. Wait. Don't. Wait. Then you got married and to enjoy it, to communicate about it, to talk about desires and like -- there's no space for that in your brain because you were never given that kind of model. To see it as a gift.

You might be married right now. And you might be the higher desire partner or the lower desire partner to see this is God's idea. This is a good thing. It takes work. It takes practice. But just like we want to grow in faith, in communication, in our love for each other, we also want to grow in our sexual intimacy. For some of you that's very, very, very hard. There are countless sexless marriages within the Christian church and it breaks the heart of the creator who created our bodies. It's hard. And for some of you what's hard is the waiting. Right, you're dating, you're into him, he's into you. You want him. He wants you. Like, you're ready. You're committed. This isn't some, you know, dangerous fling. Like, it is hard to trust God and say, "Nope, not yet, not yet, not yet." To believe that God knows what he's doing when he says, "No, only after the covenant has been made, I'll give you the gift, but not until then." No shortcuts. No asterisk. No excuses. No exceptions. It's hard.

If you have some conception of God that he's high and holy and keeping his hands clean from the messiness of our sexual lives, that is not the God of the Bible. Jesus threw himself into a kind of world where he was known as the friend of sinners, drunkards and yes prostitutes. He saved

those who have been caught up in adultery. And the gospel was preached in the Greek and Roman world where everyone was off the rails when it came to the self-control of their own body. We have a Savior who forgives you. So, brothers and sisters, if you struggle with God's definition of sex, know this. Jesus is here. He's here as you struggle. As you try to make the best decision one day at a time. As you resist temptation and repent when you fall into it. He is right here. And if that's you, you are not the person that Jesus is speaking to in this text.

I just gave you a very, very long tangent if some of you were paying attention. Cause I know what the topic of sex does in the human heart. But now I need to speak very briefly to those of you who don't struggle with God's definition. You hold to something besides God's definition. Like, here's Jesus and all of his love and all of his truth. Are there any of you here today who have let go of Jesus to hold on to something else, to a belief that sex is not God's gift, that marriage is not required, that you should follow the desires of your heart no matter what the book says? Are there any of you here today who are ashamed to say out there what Jesus says in here? Ashamed to say it to your friends, your kids, your culture, yourself. If that's you, I'm begging you today, repent.

If Jesus comes back and he finds you not struggling, but smiling while you're sinning, he will go to war against you. On the last day, if you stand before Jesus and call him ignorant, if you claim that his definition of right and wrong is wrong, it will not go well with you. Out of his mouth will come a sharpened double edge sword and his truth will cut you to the soul and you will not make it. I'm begging you today, if you're living a sexually immoral lifestyle, if you're holding to it instead of struggling against it, before it's too late, repent. Eighty years of love in this life is nothing compared to forever, so repent.

And that's why Jesus leaves us with these words today. He says in verse 17, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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." Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Let's pray.

Dear Jesus, you know. You know where we've been. You know what we've done. You know the things that we haven't done but should have.

Thank you for your unconditional love. Jesus, you spoke some hard words today, but the only reason you spoke them was to save us from something harder. Thank you for the love. Even within your discipline and your rebuke. God, I know in our culture the Devil has convinced us that sexuality is everything. That to not indulge a desire would be to give up our very selves. But that's not true because you are our life. You are our everything. You are the one thing that is needful.

And so, I pray right now, Jesus, that you will give your Holy Spirit that we would believe that. That you are worth it. That you are worthy. That there is no one, there's nothing in this life that can bless us like you have blessed us with your forgiveness, with your patience and with the free gift of eternal life.

God, I pray for me, for all of our pastors right now for courage. It's easier just to know something and let it pass. To not say something and just assume it will fix itself. Give us courage. Help us to be faithful to you, not ashamed of you. Help us not to fear the reaction of people but instead to live in fear of God. The fear of you.

And finally, Heavenly Father, I pray that you will not let a single repentant person leave today with shame. I know right here in this space are people who have been unfaithful, people who have been adulterous, people who have prostituted their bodies, people who have been trafficked. There are people who struggle with sexual purity. People who struggle with patience.

Jesus, when you went to the cross, you died for all of it: for the things that we've done, and the things that have been done to us. And so may we leave today truly believing the words that we're soon about to hear that your face is shining upon us. That you are looking on us with grace.

And may that thought rid us of all shame and instead give us peace. I pray all this God because you love us, because you're listening to us and because you long to help us. So we pray all these things today in Jesus's name. And God's people said, "Amen."