

Second Sunday in Advent

December 5, 2004

Revelation 2:12-17

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Jesus Wants You to Check Your Grip

1. Are you holding on to Jesus' name?
2. Are you holding on to anything besides Jesus?
3. Are you holding on to your white stone?

*NIV **Revelation 2:12** "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 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, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-- where Satan lives. ¹⁴ 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. 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. ¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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.*

Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus, our coming King,

Your grip matters. That's true of various athletic pursuits. If you aren't gripping a golf club properly, you'll have great difficulty hitting the ball down the fairway. It's the same with tennis racquets: there's a right way and a wrong way to grip them. And, I learned not long ago, the same is true of flyfishing. Casting well is difficult if you haven't learned how to grip the flyrod.

But what does our grip have to do with Advent? Well, it's like this: One of the great Advent messages is "Hold on!" "Hold on to the Lord's promises in faith. Hold on to your confidence that he's going to deliver on those promises." Just as God proved himself faithful and sent Jesus to this earth to be our Savior, so this same Jesus is surely going to return in glory and bring the history of the world to climactic conclusion. Jesus wants us to have an iron grip on that message.

As we can see from the letter to the church at Pergamum, Jesus is very much aware of our grip. He knows when we're holding onto the truth about him and he also knows when our grip is weakening or when we've set our grip on something spiritually dangerous. As we read this letter we find Jesus commending the Christians at Pergamum for "remaining true" (literally, "holding on") to his name. But Jesus also says that he knows that some are trying to hold on to the teaching

of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans even as they claim to be holding on to Jesus. Let's listen to Jesus and have him check our grip.

1. Are you holding on to Jesus' name?

Pergamum was a major city in the Roman province of Asia. At one time there had been a library containing 200,000 books in Pergamum—until Marc Antony shipped it off to Egypt as a present for his girlfriend, Cleopatra. In fact, the word “parchment”—the skin of sheep or goats that served as the ancient version of paper—comes from the name of the city, Pergamum. But Jesus doesn't mention the literary fame of Pergamum when he addresses this letter. He says instead, “*I know where you live—where Satan has his throne.*” I doubt that was the city father's idea of a claim to fame, but that was Jesus' take on Pergamum. Jesus may have described the city this way because it was a center of emperor worship. The citizens were encouraged to show their loyalty to the emperor by going to Caesar's altar and lighting a bit of incense while declaring Caesar as Lord. Pergamum also played host to the altars of Asclepius, the god of medicine and healing. His symbol was two snakes entwined around a staff. That symbol is still used today. It's called a caduceus and it's the symbol for a physician. But for early Christians it was simply a pagan symbol that reminded them how Satan, in the guise of a snake, had tempted Adam and Eve to sin.

To say that Pergamum was not a supportive environment in which to be a Christian is putting it mildly. The opposition took all kinds of forms. Still Jesus commends the believers in Pergamum: “*Yet you remain true—you hold 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.*” Antipas was a leader of the church in Pergamum and became the first martyr in the province of Asia. When Antipas refused to deny the name of Jesus, legend has it, his body was stuffed inside the bronze image of a bull, and the bull was heated with fire until Antipas was roasted to death. That was what holding fast to the name of Jesus could mean in 1st century Pergamum.

So how's your grip on the name of Jesus? The name of Jesus is really everything that he's told us about himself in the Bible. The Bible calls Jesus God's Anointed, the Messiah. It informs us that his divine mission was to seek and to save the lost by sacrificing his holy life in place of our sinful lives. The Bible calls Jesus the Living One, who defeated death by his resurrection. Jesus himself asserts that the way to the Father's side is through him and him alone. He calls himself the way, the truth and the life. His is the only name in all the world by which we can be saved. More than that, Jesus calls us to confess him, to demonstrate to the world our allegiance to him. And he says, “**Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.**” (Matt. 10:32-33)

That's a grip-checking passage, isn't it? It can cause us to wonder whether we'd have the faith of Antipas, to suffer all, even death, rather than deny Jesus. But I

marvel at how God through his Spirit and his Word gives his people the strength to confess him. You can read the story of a Lutheran minister named Richard Wurmbrand on the Persecution.com Web site. Wurmbrand and his wife, Sabina, converted to Christianity from Judaism in 1938. Then, at the end of World War II, when the Communists took control of Romania, Pastor and Mrs. Wurmbrand, along with 4,000 others, were invited to something called the Congress of the Cults. Many Christian ministers, fearing what lay ahead with the Communists, used that occasion to stand up and praise Communism and pledge their loyalty to the new regime. Finally, Mrs. Wurmbrand had enough. She said to her husband, "Richard, stand up and wash away this shame from the face of Christ." Richard warned, "If I do so, you'll lose your husband." And Sabina replied, "I don't wish to have a coward as a husband." Then Richard took the podium and declared before the delegates that their duty is to glorify Christ and Christ alone. It wasn't long after that Richard was arrested, imprisoned on two occasions for a total of nearly 15 years, and tortured. Meanwhile, Sabina was also arrested and sent to a labor camp, leaving their 9-year-old son homeless. But by the grace of God the Wurmbrands were able to hold fast to the name of Jesus.

I compare being a Christian to carrying a basketball with one hand. There's room in your hand for just one basketball and there's room in your heart for just one confession. That one basketball is our confession that "Jesus is Lord." That is, we can't hold to Christ while at the same time trying to hold to beliefs or practices that deny Christ. So here's the next question Jesus has as he observes our grip: Are you holding to something besides Jesus?

2. Are you holding to something besides Jesus?

It seems that at least some in the church at Pergamum were trying to do the impossible and worship Jesus and idols. Jesus says, *"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 have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans."* We said last week that we're not quite sure what kind of sin the Nicolaitans were promoting, but the teaching of Balaam is pretty clear. Balaam was the soothsayer hired by King Balak of Moab. Balak hired Balaam because he was afraid of the Israelites, who were coming through his territory on their way to the Promised Land. He was ready to pay Balaam big money to put a curse on Israel. But Balaam couldn't do it. God was shielding Israel from those attempted curses. Despite repeated efforts, every time Balaam opened his mouth he ended up blessing the Israelites rather than cursing them. But before he left in defeat, Balaam gave King Balak a piece of advice. He told Balak that what he had been unable to do with curses, Balak could accomplish simply by sending the women of Moab out to seduce the Israelite men into worshipping idols. Of course, sexual sin and idolatry went hand-in-hand for the Moabites. Balaam's advice worked: Very quickly many of the Israelite men committing sexual immorality and God's anger burned against them. Twenty-four thousand Israelites perished due to a plague that swept through their camp.

Satan still tries to get at people with the sin of Balaam. Earlier this week I was reading that the city of Atlanta has a very high percentage of Christians. But the author also noted that the city of Atlanta has one of the highest rates of televisions tuned to the show “Desperate Housewives.” He wondered about the inconsistency between claiming to be a Christian and watching shows that glorify immorality. But that’s how Satan works. He conspires with our sinful nature to lead us to think that we can have it both ways, as if we can just park our Christianity in the corner for a while we engage in things that we go against God’s will. But that kind of accommodation of immorality is deadly to the soul. Jesus sounds the wake-up call for compromising Christians when he says here, “*Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*” That sword of his mouth is his Word, the Word that declares repentant sinners not guilty, but which also sentences the impenitent to an eternity of misery away from God and his light.

Do you remember the controversy that Charlton Heston was involved in about five or six years ago? He had been speaking at a NRA convention about the possibility that new laws might deprive him of his guns. He held aloft a vintage rifle and said that if federal agents wanted to take that rifle away from him, they’d have to “pry it from his cold, dead fingers.” In other words, he had quite a grip on his gun. With all due respect to the man who played Moses, I would suggest that there is something other than a gun that I want to grip so tightly. It’s the white stone that Jesus has given me.

3. Are you holding on to your white stone?

In the last part of this letter, Jesus says, “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. 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 has two gifts for those who hold fast to him. The first is “hidden manna.” Manna was the miracle bread that kept the Israelites alive in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Hidden manna, then, is gift of eternal life, a gift that remains hidden from men until the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of their faith and leads them to trust in Jesus.

The white stone is another way of saying the same thing. In ancient times, the members of a jury would vote with a white stone for the acquittal of the defendant. When Jesus says that he’s given you a white stone, he’s telling you that through faith in him and his death and resurrection you stand not guilty in God’s sight. With this white stone comes a new name. As a believer in Jesus you are no longer God’s enemy or the object of his anger. You are God’s child and a member of his family. The Bible says that having been justified through, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It says, “**God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” And it says that we Christians were chosen in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in God’s sight. Blessed are you if you know these things and believe them. You are holding a white stone in your hand.

I hope that we all come away from this letter to Pergamum saying, “Jesus, give me a stronger hold on your name. Forgive me for trying to hold to any other teachings than the truth that you are my only Savior. Help me hold on to that white stone that you’ve given me with a grip of steel.” As we turn again to his Word this Advent season, he gives us the strength to do just that. Amen.