

# DEAR CHURCH,

## Study of the Seven Churches in Revelation

### Bible Fellowship Discussion Guide

#### To the Church in Pergamum - Revelation 2:12-17

##### Open It

1. What do you consider to be the most evil or sinful place on earth? Why?
2. What strange philosophy or common misconception (urban myth, old wives' tale, etc.) do you consider most dangerous? Why?

##### Explore It

1. What church was the subject of this letter from Jesus? (2:12)
2. How did the speaker in this passage identify Himself? (2:12)
3. \*For what did Jesus praise the people of the church at Pergamum? (2:13)
4. How did Balaam (of Old Testament times) influence the believers at Pergamum? (2:14)
5. What bad influences or teachings had infiltrated the church at Pergamum? (2:14-15)
6. \*What were the believers at Pergamum doing wrong? (2:14-15)
7. \*What command did Christ give to this church in light of its dangerous direction? (2:16)
8. What stern warning was issued for those who would not obey Christ? (2:17)
9. Who else did Jesus say could benefit from the message to the church at Pergamum? (2:17)
10. What did Jesus promise to "him who overcomes"? (2:17)

##### Get It

1. What does it mean that Christ has a "sharp, double-edged sword"?
2. What should it mean to us that Jesus doesn't overlook sin, even if we are doing lots of good deeds?
3. In what ways could it be said that Satan lives in our city?
4. How does sin in others affect us?
5. \*What "little" sins do we tend to allow into our life-style and habits?
6. What is the best way to deal with Christians (whether real or false) who circulate unbiblical ideas?
7. What are some potential problems for churches that discipline members publicly?
8. What does repentance have to do with following Christ?
9. \*How can we resist the influence of the world around us?
10. What do you think it means that we will get new names for persevering with Christ?

##### Apply It

1. \*What can you do today to show that Jesus is present in your life, in your church, and in your town?
2. What "little" sins do you need to confess today in order to be spiritually clean?

# Brief Commentary on Revelation 2:12-17

By Matthew Henry

The word of God is a sword, able to slay both sin and sinners. It turns and cuts every way; but the believer need not fear this sword; yet this confidence cannot be supported without steady obedience. As our Lord notices all the advantages and opportunities we have for duty in the places where we dwell, so he notices our temptations and discouragements from the same causes. In a situation of trials, the church of Pergamos had not denied the faith, either by open apostacy, or by giving way so as to avoid the cross. Christ commends their stedfastness, but reproves their sinful failures. A wrong view of gospel doctrine and Christian liberty, was a root of bitterness from which evil practices grew. Repentance is the duty of churches and bodies of men, as well as of particular persons; those who sin together, should repent together. Here is the promise of favour to those that overcome. The influences and comforts of the Spirit of Christ, come down from heaven into the soul, for its support. This is hidden from the rest of the world. The new name is the name of adoption; when the Holy Spirit shows his own work in the believer's soul, this new name and its real import are understood by him.

## Extensive Background on Revelation 2:12-17

By Enduring Word Commentary - *David Guzik*

### Jesus' letter to the church at Pergamos.

#### 1. (12a) The character of the city of Pergamos.

“**And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write,**

a. **Pergamos:** This was the political capital of the Roman Province of Asia the Less. When John wrote, Pergamos had been the capital city of the region for more than three hundred years. The city was a noted center for culture and education, having one of the great libraries of the ancient world, with more than 200,000 volumes.

b. **Pergamos:** This was also an extremely religious city. It had temples to the Greek and Roman gods Dionysus, Athena, Demeter, and Zeus. It also had three temples dedicated to the worship of the Roman Emperor.

i. Some 50 years before Smyrna won the honor of building the first temple to Tiberius, the city of Pergamos won the right to build the first temple to worship Caesar Augustus in the province of Asia.

c. **Pergamos:** This city was especially known as a center for the worship of the deity known as Asclepius. Represented by a serpent, Asclepius was the god of healing and knowledge. There was a medical school at his temple in Pergamos. Because of the famous temple to the Roman god of healing, sick and diseased people from all over the Roman Empire flocked to Pergamos for relief.

i. "Sufferers were allowed to spend the night in the darkness of the temple. In the temple there were tame snakes. In the night the sufferer might be touched by one of these tame and harmless snakes as it glided over the ground on which he lay. The touch of the snake was held to be the touch of the god himself, and the touch was held to bring health and healing." (Barclay)

## 2. (12b) Jesus describes Himself to the church at Pergamos.

**'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword:**

a. **He who has the sharp two-edged sword:** In Revelation 1:16, John observed of Jesus *out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword*. Now, Jesus "showed" this **two-edged sword** to the Christians in Pergamos.

i. The description of the sword in Revelation 1:18 helps us to associate it with the *mouth* of Jesus. Jesus will confront this church with His word, and they will feel the **sharp** edges.

b. **Sharp two-edged sword:** This reminds us of the passage in Hebrews 4:12: *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*. Jesus would use this **sharp two-edged sword** to make some separation among the Christians in Pergamos.

## 3. (13) What Jesus knows about the church at Pergamos.

**"I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.**

a. **I know your works:** Jesus said this to each church. It is true of each one of us. He knows our **works**, even if there isn't much to know.

b. **And where you dwell, where Satan's throne is:** In many ways, Pergamos was a stronghold of Satanic power.

i. There are many different opinions as to why Pergamos was such a stronghold of Satanic power. Some believe it is because Pergamos was a center of pagan religion, especially of "*Asclepios Soter*" or "*Asclepios Savior*." Some believe it was because Pergamos had a huge throne-like altar dedicated to the Roman god Zeus. Some believe it was because Pergamos was a center for the ancient Babylonian priesthood, but this is tough to prove conclusively. Others believe it was because Pergamos was the political center of the worship-demanding Roman government.

c. **And you hold fast to My name:** Despite the fact they lived in such a difficult city, the Christians of Pergamos held fast to their faith in Jesus (**hold fast to My name... did not deny My faith**).

i. **Did not deny My faith:** Jesus praised the Christians of Pergamos because they did not deny *His* faith. It is always important to make sure that the faith we hold on to is the faith that belongs to Jesus.

d. **Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you:** One specific man among the Christians of Pergamos received a precious title (**faithful martyr**). This same title was held by Jesus also (Revelation 1:5). **Antipas** was a man who followed Jesus, who was like Jesus.

i. **Antipas** is one of the great almost-anonymous heroes of the Bible. History tells us nothing about him except for here. “It is much no ecclesiastical history makes mention of this martyr Antipas, which argues him to have been a person but of obscure note in the world; but Christ seeth and taketh notice of those little ones who belong to him, though the world overlooks them.” (Poole)

ii. **Antipas** lived **where Satan’s throne** was. Yet he stood against the attacks and the evil around him. He fulfilled the meaning of his name, because **Antipas** means “Against All.”

iii. **Martyr** is the ancient Greek word *martus*. “*Martus* is a most interesting and suggestive word. In classical Greek *martus* never means a *martyr* in our sense of the term. It always means a *witness*. A *martus* was one who said: ‘This is true, and I know it.’ It is not until New Testament times that *martus* ever means *martyr*.” (Barclay)

#### **4. (14-15) What Jesus has *against* the Christians in Pergamos.**

**But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.**

a. **I have a few things against you:** The Christians in Pergamos were rightly praised for holding fast to the name of Jesus and keeping his faith. At the same time, their difficult environment did not excuse the **few things** Jesus had **against** them.

b. **You have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam:** Balaam was a prototype of all corrupt teachers. According to Numbers 22-24 and 31, Balaam combined the sins of immorality and idolatry to please Balak, the king of Moab, because he could not curse Israel directly.

i. When Balaam counseled Balak, he **taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel**. The **stumbling block** was connected with idolatry (**to eat things sacrificed to idols**) and **sexual immorality**. If the church in Pergamos had those who did **hold the doctrine of Balaam**, it showed they had tendencies towards both idolatry and immorality.

ii. Sexual immorality marked the whole culture of the ancient Roman Empire. It was simply taken for granted, and the person who lived by Biblical standards of purity was considered strange. To paraphrase the Roman statesman Cicero, cited in Barclay: “If there is anyone who thinks that young men should not be allowed the love of many women, he is extremely severe. I am not able to deny the principle he stands on. But he contradicts, not only with the freedom our age allows, but also with the customs and allowances of our ancestors. When indeed was this not done? When did anyone find fault with it? When was such permission denied? When was it that what is now allowed was not allowed?” To keep from **sexual immorality** in that culture, you really had to swim against the current.

c. **You also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans:** In Revelation 2:6, Jesus praised the Ephesian Christians because they hated *the deeds of the Nicolaitans*. But the **Nicolaitans** also had their **doctrine**, and some among the Christians of Pergamos held **the doctrine of the Nicolaitans**.

i. What is the **doctrine of the Nicolaitans**? The title *Nico-laitans* has the idea of a proud authority and a hierarchical separatism. The name *Nikao-laos* literally means “to conquer the people.” According to ancient commentators, the **Nicolaitans** also approved of immorality.

d. **You have those there... you also have those:** The rebuke was not only against those who **hold the doctrines of Balaam** and **those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans**. The rebuke was also against those who allowed them to continue (**you have there those... you have those**).

i. The Christians of Pergamos were like the Christians of Corinth as Paul wrote to them in 1 Corinthians 5:1-9. They were too tolerant and accepting of false doctrines and immoral living, and Jesus had to rebuke them. Satan couldn't accomplish much by persecution, because many did *hold fast*, like Antipas. So Satan tried to accomplish his goals by using deception. The strategy was first *violence*, then *alliance*.

ii. A difficult environment never justifies compromise. It is easy for a church in such difficulty to justify this compromise in the name of “we need all the help we can get” – but no church needs that kind of help.

## **5. (16) What Jesus wants the church at Pergamos to do.**

**Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.**

a. **Repent:** The simple word **repent** stands out. Five of the seven churches are commanded to repent. **Repent** is a command that applies to Christians, not only to those who first come to Jesus.

b. **Or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth:** Unless they do **repent**, the Christians of Pergamos would face the Jesus who has the two-edged sword. Judgment will begin at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17).

i. **The sword of My mouth:** When Jesus came **against** the Christians of Pergamos, He will confront them with His Word.

## **6. (17a) A general exhortation to all whom will hear.**

**“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

a. **He who has an ear:** The danger of false teaching and immoral conduct still faces the church today. So does the danger of *allowing* false teaching and immorality, as was the problem with the Christians in Pergamos.

## 7. (17b) The promise of a reward.

**To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.”**

a. **To him who overcomes:** The one who overcomes this spirit of accommodation to false teaching and living will receive **hidden manna**. This is God's perfect provision, the true bread from heaven (John 6:41).

b. **And I will give him a white stone:** In the ancient world, the use of a **white stone** had many associations. A **white stone** could be a ticket to a banquet, a sign of friendship, evidence of having been counted, or as a sign of acquittal in a court of law. Jesus may have any one of these meanings in mind, but at the very least we know that it has the assurance of blessing.

i. Adam Clarke wrote: “Others suppose there is an allusion here to conquerors in the public games, who were not only conducted with great pomp into the city to which they belonged, but had a *white stone* given to them, with *their name inscribed on it*; which badge entitled them, during their whole life, to be maintained at the public expense... These were called *tesserae* among the Romans, and of these there were several kinds.” Clarke then gives examples of the different kinds: “*Tesserae conviviales*, which answered exactly to our *cards of invitation*, or tickets of admission to a public feast or banquet; when the person invited produced his *tessera* he was admitted... But the most remarkable of these instruments were the *Tesserae hospitales*, which were given as badges of *friendship* and *alliance*, and on which some device was engraved, as a testimony that a contract of friendship had been made between the parties.”

c. **And on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it:** What is the meaning of this **new**, secret **name** promised to **him who overcomes**? Is it God's name, or is it the believer's name? This is probably the believer's new name, and the name itself is probably more important than the stone itself.

i. One idea behind this new, secret name is that it shows what an intimate relationship we have with God. When a couple is close, they often have “pet names” for each other. This is probably the same idea.

ii. Another idea associated with the new name is simply the assurance it gives of our heavenly destination. Your name is there, waiting for you. It is as if your “reservation” in heaven is made.