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Revelation 2:12–17, ESV.

¹² “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. ¹⁴ But 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. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war 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 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.’

Satan’s throne.

We’ve looked at the letters to the seven churches in Revelation. I’d like to focus on one of them, the letter to Pergamum. As a reminder, in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation, John from Ephesus, who was exiled on the island of Patmos, writes letters to seven major churches that were active in his day. While we call them letters, in truth they are prophetic pronouncements, not standard letters of the day. By using language that is very reminiscent of the Hebrew scriptures, one thing is made clear. John isn’t delivering his words: he is delivering God’s words to these churches. The letter to the church at Pergamum is the third letter. Before we look

at it, though, I'd like to talk about our society. I did some research over the last month or so, and to be honest, something that I thought might be very boring proved almost intolerable. I was viewing stuff that is easily accessible to most children in this nation, but a lot of it was very difficult to confront.

My research started with video games. I happen to build 3D immersive environments for people to hold meetings in. The idea is to build a colorful environment, like a fantasy forest, where people can enter as avatars and meet and talk. The website for that is ElectricFaith.org. Using the environment is completely free. I don't build full blown games, with guns and swords and race cars and outer space empires. But in general, I have looked at many dozens of games. But I have always avoided, though, the ones that I knew I didn't want to look at. Here's the problem. Until kids are about 7 years old, they have difficulty separating reality from fantasy. It of course varies from kid to kid. This is the key reason they often are not allowed to be witnesses in court. They are highly suggestible. Even when they are older, and enter their teenaged years, they are being exposed to violent content where evil is normalized, and depravity is portrayed as something exciting and fun. But they are still fairly suggestible. We all already know that television has grown more violent in the last couple of decades, while at the same time, parents are being more permissive in letting their kids freely watch TV. So, yes,

they are watching people get shot, sexually assaulted, and horrifically injured in gun fights – and in extremely graphic ways. But video games let kids participate in the violence. There is a long-standing, highly successful series of video games called *Grand Theft Auto*. Until I was researching this particular sermon, I avoided these games. In these games the player is the criminal. There is no way to play the role of a police officer or an innocent witness. Each game has an extremely large number of variations embedded in it, and so a kid can play it for hundreds of hours without ever repeating a single given sequence. Playing such a game is addictive – and that is the entire point of engineering these games. Teens are known to play nonstop for upwards of 24 hours. There is something unbelievably powerful about the impact on the mind of a kid when they are role playing in this fashion. A teenager in Thailand apparently recently died from a stroke after a several day and night marathon session playing violent video games. In Louisiana, an 8-year-old shot and killed an elderly caregiver after playing a violent video game. In *Grand Theft Auto*, you steal, you kill cops, you have relations with prostitutes. You can murder the prostitute so that you don't have to pay her. The games are filled with the worst profanities imaginable. I checked out several other games, with similar results. There are hundreds and hundreds of games that are equally filled with evil.

Underaged young people are being programmed to hate, the harm, to destroy everything that we think is holy and good.

I then turned to reality TV – something that made me squirm. People humiliating themselves, being wildly promiscuous, holding celebrity-ship as the ultimate goal of any human, no matter how much you have to degrade yourself. One show is called *Love Island*, and in it, the contestants have sex with people whom they just met. There is a show called *Love During Lockup* where women seek out hot felons; the idea is that it's exciting to have a relationship with someone who has committed violent crimes. There are a host of survival shows in which the contestants do dangerous things. Contestants have broken their backs, suffered burns and heatstroke. The opportunity to watch people risk their safety is the big draw. One such show is called *Naked and Afraid* – and yes, you guessed it, contestants are dropped naked in the wilderness; a man and a woman must survive this way for 21 days. One contestant tore his scrotum open on a tree branch. Remember, young kids watch these shows.

The last thing I looked at in preparing this sermon is the new generation of social media platforms, ones meant specifically for kids. There is a move away from more time-consuming, in-depth sites, like *Facebook* and *YouTube*, where you might spend a half hour focused on a single thing. Now, kids are into *TikTok* videos, which

can be no more than 90 seconds long. Recently a teenager took a so-called *TikTok* “challenge” to swallow many Benadryl pills. It was supposed to give him hallucinations. Instead, it killed him. There is a whole world of social media influencers, where very young girls are often highly sexualized. On various social media platforms specifically meant for young people, kids are routinely bullied, have their privacy invaded, have their identities stolen, and are exposed to pornographic material.

I’ll stop there. The point is that many children these days are not getting their moral guidance from God or even from their parents. Here is John’s prophetic words - words from God - to the church at Pergamum:

¹² “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. ¹⁴ But 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. ¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

God tells the congregation at Pergamum, the wealthy city located in what is now Turkey, that they are the home of Satan’s throne. This probably has two meanings. First, Pergamum, the home of Satan’s throne, is like Rome: Pergamum had a large temple dedicated to the Roman emperor, whom they considered a god.

Second, many of the members of the church at Pergamum apparently worshipped pagan gods. God says that some of the people of the church were indeed strong in their faith, even standing firm in the face of persecution and execution. But some of these folks who claimed they were following Jesus Christ, lived by the teachings of Balaam. Balaam was an Old Testament character who had powerful God-given prophetic gifts, but he used them to make money by doing evil. Balak, the king of the Moabites, who were enemies of the Israelites, used Balaam to manipulate God's people into immoral sexual practices to weaken them as a nation. There were also so-called believers in Pergamum who practiced the teachings of the Nicolaitans. These people lived lives of unrestrained indulgence. Notice that it says that the followers of Balaam and apparently Nicolas ate "*food sacrificed to idols*". This is much more significant than one might think. Roman emperors forced people to publicly eat food that had been sacrificed to idols to demonstrate their allegiance to Rome and its pagan religion. Remember that the Roman Emperor was treated like a god.

God, through the pen of John, goes on to tell the members of the congregation in Pergamum the following:

¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war 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 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.'

If they do not repent and seek forgiveness and return to their faith, God says he will *“war against them with the sword of my mouth”*. This is a reference to God’s Word, the law that binds all followers. Those who remain faithful will receive hidden manna; this symbolically declares that God will provide for them when they are in great need. They will also receive a white stone. We’re not sure what this means, but white stones were used by jurors to indicate innocence at that time – and so maybe this means that they will be rewarded by God at the End Times.

Many, perhaps most formerly Christian families in the United States have drifted away from their faith. In many ways, the United States is Pergamum, the seat of Satan’s throne. But the new pagan gods who guide so many young people in our society are television, social media, and video games. These gods teach the same thing that the pagan gods of Pergamum taught: to indulge yourself and live with no respect for the safety of other people or for common decency.

There is a book of the New Testament called James: we believe this was written by the brother of Jesus. In the first chapter, he says:

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.

This is very good advice, which is given many times in the Bible, in many forms. It tells us that if we lack wisdom, if we don't know what we are up to and we need guidance, then we should turn to God. We should remember that we have faith in God, that we trust God without any doubt, and therefore we should listen to God and do things God's way. People who do not do this are like waves of the sea, lifted up by the wind – and then immediately lost to the world.

You might remember the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Remember that they were told by God not to eat the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It's not the fruit of the tree of Good and Evil, but the fruit of the tree of the *Knowledge* of Good and Evil. This means that at the very beginning of the human species, we were told by God to get our knowledge of good and evil from God – and not to go try and figure out life on our own. We need God's guidance to differentiate right and wrong. When we try to make decisions in life on our own, we make horrible mistakes over and over and over.

Just like the people of Pergamum, we are under intense pressure to publicly deny our faith. Society wants us to stand up and, with everyone watching, eat food offered to idols. Television shows generally portray Christians as angry, intolerant, and bigoted people. It's no wonder that young people – who get much of their wisdom from television – don't want to have anything to do with Christian faith.

Young people are grabbing that fruit from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and voraciously eating it. They are learning their moral code from video games and social media. They are numb to violence, hatred, and pain.

This is an incredible opportunity for us to live out our faith. We can be a powerful influence in the world. We must remember, though, what we are told in both the Gospels of Mark and Matthew. Here are Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew: *"whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave"*. The way we can gain the respect of society and regain our influence is by being humble servants.

There is something else that all of us can do. All of us. Remember this lesson in the Gospel of Matthew, a lesson we also read in similar form in Mark and Luke. Jesus is walking from Bethany to Jerusalem with his disciples when we read this:

¹⁸ In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he became hungry. ¹⁹ And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!" And the fig tree withered at once.

²⁰ When the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, "How did the fig tree wither at once?" ²¹ And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. ²² And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith."

Jesus tells us that if we come to God in prayer, we can cause a mountain to be thrown into the sea. This is a metaphor, of course. The point is that we can

indeed do great things simply by praying. We can engage God's help in transforming young people. We can make the power of TV, video games, and social media wither, just as Jesus made the barren fig tree wither. Please pray with me.

God, we ask you to please rescue a lost generation. Pull them away from violent video games, shameless and unrestrained TV shows, and corrupt social media, all of which teaches them to disrespect human life, to have no value for all those whom you made in your image. Let them live by the two great commandments of Jesus Christ, to love you with all their hearts and minds, and to love their neighbor as themselves. May they get their wisdom from you. Amen.