

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH  
September 30, 2018  
Going Against the Cultural Grain – Dear Church  
JOSHUA SYMONETTE

If you have a Bible, will you go with me to the book of Revelation chapter 2? We will get there in just a moment before we do though, I have to give a huge shout out this weekend, 60 years ago, this weekend the woman I call my Mama was born and so I gotta give a big shout out to her for her 60th birthday. And, you know, the reason I wanted to do this is because, you know, you can choose a lot of things in your life, but you can't choose your parents. And I'm grateful for the parents that I have and I love them dearly. Although when I was an adolescent or, you know, coming into my teenage years, that's about the time when stuff starts going haywire. I thought that my parents were very skilled at ruining my life. Hey, maybe I'm alone. They will also very talented at saying what I thought was the most inappropriate things at the most inappropriate time because I didn't want to hear them. They also were very gifted at correcting me and calling it tough love, you know. And I'm just like, yo, I'm with the love piece but I, you know, I could do without the tough stuff, you know, you can keep that because, you know, the tough part doesn't feel good, you know. And I thought about my mom and how awesome I thought she was at capitalizing on those tough love moments. And I may have told this story before, you may have heard me share it before, but I remember I was about 10 or 11 years old and I was playing football and I grew up playing all the sports and I lived about a couple of blocks from the park where we were, we played. And so, I got my stuff together on a Saturday morning and walked to the park and I'm getting dressed and we get ready to warm up. And all of a sudden I saw this a funnel cloud aggressively moving across the field and it looked just like my mother. And so, I moved away from my teammates because I couldn't risk them seeing this interaction because I knew it probably was not good. And so I go up to my mom and she says to me, you better get your butt home and wash those dishes. And just in case you didn't know, you know, like black moms, they tend to talk a little aggressive to their kids, you know, that's kind of a cultural thing. But at that moment, like my world is just blown like, yo, like you mean to tell me I'm not going to get to play this game today potentially because I didn't wash dishes, yo, that's crazy. So I go home and I'm upset because I'm not even really good at football at this point, you know, I'm like, I'm still developing. And the team that we were going to play that day was terrible. So that means we probably go to score a lot of points and that was probably won't get a chance to play. So I'm just like super upset with my mom at this point.

But I'm reminded of this story as we continue our series this weekend called Dear Church because my parents knew that I was a good kid, I was compliant, I got good grades, I never gave them much trouble, but they knew I had a tendency to cut corners when maybe I didn't want to do something. They knew that I had a tendency to compromise maybe when it got tough or if it was just something that I wasn't really interested in doing and my parents knew that cutting corners and unhealthy compromises would not be a good thing for me. That would be detrimental to me in my future. And there was a standard. There was a way that they demanded that I live and it wasn't because they were domineering or because they were mean or controlling or relished in the opportunities to correct me but as Christ followers, they understood their responsibility to disciple me. And there were three primary ways that they would do this, they

would first affirm me, which means that they would encourage the good things that they saw and they would celebrate the positive things that was happening. And then secondly, they would hold me accountable when that standard that was set, I was not meeting it, or maybe I was not giving my best effort. And then thirdly, they would push me towards the proper actions that I needed to take to develop the right habits to get on track and go in the opposite direction of maybe the habits that I was developing that was not good.

And those three things that I mentioned are pretty much the framework that we see in some of the letters that we're going to be going through in this series to the seven churches in Asia Minor. It was just this idea of confronting and, and also, speaking of the good things that we're doing and then calling them into a particular action to address the things that were happening. And so I want to unpack these words from Jesus that John has sent to the Church of Pergamum that we find in Revelation chapter number two. So if you don't mind, will you do me a favor and stand as we honor the reading of God's word this weekend? If you don't have a Bible, we'll have the words for you on the screen. We won't leave you hanging and you can follow along with us. Starting in verse number 12. It says...

*12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:*

*These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.*

This is a reference to a metaphor of Jesus. It says,

*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.*

*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.*

*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.*

God, we come before you this weekend asking that you would speak to us, that you would illuminate for us the direction and the way that you would have for us to go. Help us to hear these words and apply them to where we are in our lives and to translate them into what they mean for us here and now in this time. All these things we ask in your son Jesus' name, Amen. You may be seated.

Before we unpack this letter that we just ran, let me just give you some quick background and context information. In week one, Pastor Joel did a great job of giving us a fuller context of all of these letters to kickoff the series, but I want you to keep this in mind as we go through this letter today. There are three key issues at play here through several of the letters. Number one; there was this tension of faith versus culture or faith and culture. And then secondly, you had a question of who were the people of God. This was an identity issue, who's in and who is out. And then thirdly, you have the integration of the Gentiles into this Jewish, primarily Jewish community and Gentiles were anyone who was not Jewish, and this was more sociological than it was theological. So just put that in the back of your mind and put that off to the side, we'll circle back to a couple of those in just a second.

Geographically, Pergamum, was located in modern day Turkey, about 70 miles north of Smyrna. Smyrna was the city that Pastor Mark was talking about on last week. It was 16 miles east of the GNC and about 200,000 people were in this city, so this was not a small town; there are a lot of people there. And they were known to have one of the great libraries of the ancient world. As a matter of fact, the word parchment, which many of the books would have been written on, derived from the word of Pergamum. Sociologically speaking, the landscape here, it was very paganistic and it was an imperial cultic culture. There were four patron deities that they worshiped there; Zeus, Athena, Dionysus and Asclepius or Asclepius{pronounced differently}. And they had the first imperial cult temple that was built in 29 BC. And then they had this huge altar that was built for Zeus and one of the largest altars in the ancient world. And that is because paganism was just a way of life there, it was a sense of pride for the people as well, it was expected for you to participate in pagan worship.

So, this letter is written to this small Judeo Christian community that had been established there since about the second century BC, and they lived in the tension or between the tension of upholding the confession of faith and the moral code which would have been summarized in Acts chapter 15. Pastor Joel touched on that just a little bit and to summarize that, it was just these three things; you were to refrain from meat sacrificed to idols, you were to refrain from blood which Rome loved the blood sport and fornication and sexual immorality. Now what you have to understand is that those things that I just mentioned, those restrictions that were given, this was in direct contrast to what was normal life in the Roman Empire, this is how they lived. And so this letter is addressing how the Judeo Christian community has been living in Pergamum with these restrictions among these people who embraced this as their normal life. So, John then pens these words from Jesus that he receives in a vision. Now, Jesus in his communication to Pergamum; I mean, for all intents and purposes, as far as I'm concerned, is just giving them good coaching and it's still coaching that I think is relevant to the church today, even though this was written so long ago. And the coaching, it can really be framed in those three things that I mentioned earlier; there's affirmation, there's accountability, and then there's action. And it's the same thing that I believe that my parents were trying to give to me when they were discipling me. So, let's just dive right in because Jesus, he doesn't waste any words. He just kinda announces who he is, and then he jumps right into verse 12 talking about affirmation, so we're going to start there.

In verse 12, he says, listen, there's a bunch of evil around you, I know that you are in the presence of darkness, you're in the presence of Satan yet you have remained true to me. You did

not denounce me and there was even a brother in your community, Antipas, who was put to death because of his faith, and you still remained true to me. Jesus is saying, I see you doing the right thing. I see you still being for me, despite all that is going on, and we must understand that Jesus is giving them a positive affirmation, which is hugely important because affirmations psychologically serve as a way to reprogram our subconscious mind to give us positive reinforcement and tell us, keep doing that. That right there, you need to keep doing that because that is a good thing and the result of that is it makes us feel better about ourselves, right? It also helps us understand that what we're doing is the right thing.

This reminds me of a story that I heard this week and it's a story about a young man who in the late eighties was a basketball player and he was going to attend this very prominent summer basketball league. And he knew that there were greats who had gone through this summer basketball league. People like Wilt Chamberlain and even his father who was a previous NBA player. But throughout this entire summer league and all of the games that were played, this young man did not score one point, not a free throw, not a layup, not an open shot, not one point. And you can imagine how crushed he was. You can imagine how disappointed he was, he had put in all of this effort and it not turn out the way that he wanted it to. He felt embarrassed, he was hurt, he even cried and lamented to his father. And his father pulled him close and hugged him, and he says, son, listen, if you score 100 or if your score nothing, I would still love you no matter what. And this young man who we know today as Colby Bryant has scored plenty of points. As a matter of fact, he's one of the greatest to ever play. Colby said that moment, that moment of positive affirmation gave me all of the confidence in the world. And that's what positive affirmation is supposed to do. And this is what I believe Jesus is trying to do with the church at Pergamum. He's trying to give them confidence in the midst of a very tough situation. He understands what they're up against. Can you imagine being in Pergamum and getting this letter when you got all of these things going on around you when one of your brothers in your community has been killed, which means that you could be killed for what you believe too. Getting this letter from Jesus saying, hey, I see you and what you're doing is a good thing, keep doing that. It would have been a huge boost in confidence.

And let me just give you this side note for any of you who lead and teach and train and inspire and try to grow others and you disciple people make sure you're giving positive affirmation. It is a groundwork that needs to be laid that is a very, very important.

So Jesus opens up with giving affirmation but then secondly, he goes on to call them into accountability. He knows that they're in a tough situation, but in order for them to grow in their faith, he has to hold them accountable to a particular standard, and this is the part that we don't love. We love affirmation, it makes us feel good, it makes us feel positive, but we don't necessarily love accountability. We don't necessarily love being corrected because sometimes correction, doesn't feel good? Listen to what he says in verse 14. It says...

*14 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.*

This would have been assuming that the people in this community understood the story of Balaam which is found in the book of Numbers in the Old Testament. And Balaam was he was a

Midianite who was said to have this power to bless and to curse, but he could not curse Israel, but he conspired with Balak, who was a Moabite king who wanted to defeat Israel. Israel was moving too close to him and he felt threatened by them and so he wanted Balak to entice to curse them, but he wasn't able to do that. But what he did was he conspired with him and then somehow he was able to have people entice some of the Israelites to get them to engage in the practices of eating meat sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality. These were two of the three things in the moral code you could not do under any circumstances. He also says that the people in Pergamum, some people in Pergamum were being influenced by a group called the Nicolaitans. Now, historically we don't really know who the Nicolaitans are, but we know that their teachings and their practices were not consistent with the standard that God had for the church.

And here's where I want to put a little money in the meter and just park right here for a second because listen, this is a real tension in Pergamum and I think it's a real tension in DC, I think it's a real tension for the church. You know, why? Because we are bombarded by Nicolaitan type influences in our culture, people who subscribe to things that are not congruent with what we believe or they've added or they subtracted some things for whatever reason, and they don't completely align with our faith. And so what that causes is it causes us to wrestle or it causes some tension within us, it causes us to have questions about things and sometimes questions about ourselves. And we're thinking to ourselves questions like, how do I reflect Jesus on Capitol Hill while graciously navigating the myriad of differences and dividing lines sometimes within parties or policies or maybe even the abuse of power in certain positions or people I worked for and with that I don't agree with. So, real tension how do I stay true to my faith when I know that participating in something is questionable but it's expected and if I don't do it, it might have a negative impact on my career trajectory. Real tension. How do I balance advocating for and identifying with my black and brown brothers and sisters while also pursuing a multi-ethnic camaraderie and unity as the Gospels outline and command us to do? Can I push beyond the cultural labels and boundaries of affirming and non-affirming and love and welcomed my gay neighbors? Things that we are wrestling with and thinking through, these are real tensions, real questions, real conversations that I've had at different times, real things that I'm hearing coming out of our culture.

You must understand that these tensions that I just mentioned and many others are no different than what they were wrestling with in Pergamum. They were trying to love God. They were trying to also love their Gentile neighbors and also include those into their community who wanted to follow Christ, but maybe they weren't doing it the right way or they were trying to add and subtract and so it was just getting complicated. They were trying to do the right thing and you must also understand and realize that not eating meat sacrificed to idols either completely changed your diet or almost completely eliminated all of your options because that was the meat that was being sold in the markets. That was the meat that was available. You must also understand that people doing whatever with whoever sexually and all of the things associated, it was just prominent in culture, this stuff was just hard to manage. And honestly, I don't think anything has changed, it's still hard for us to manage some of these things. And so what happened was many of them just resorted to 'well, I'm just going to fit in with the culture'. And I gotta be honest, I get it because it's an easy front end decision to just compromise a little bit because sometimes you don't know what to do or you don't know what to say. And we live in a

world as pitting ourselves against each other and if you vote this way, you must think this or if you're sympathetic to this, then you must be this. And sometimes our stance as a Christ follower, it just seems inconvenient and maybe even times irrelevant and it's just easier to swim with the current than against. And this is why some of us follow God to the point of convenience. The moment it gets inconvenient or threatens our comfort level, that's a problem which means that we've elevated our comfort above our calling so, we go with the cultural flow of things and sometimes even completely fall away.

Listen, Jesus didn't say to the disciples, they will know what I'm about if you do what the culture does, he didn't, he didn't say that. He didn't say they will know who I am and they will understand what I'm about if you accommodate what makes you and others feel comfortable, he didn't say that. He also didn't say, they will know who you are, they will know what I'm about, they will understand if you radically defend your faith, he didn't say that either. He said they will know who I am and they will know what you are about by your love. Now, rust me, listen, that's not a cop-out statement because real love is sacrificial, it costs you something and it's just easier and cheaper to compromise. I'm all about a good deal. And sometimes the compromise just looks like a good deal, but it doesn't lead us down the path that Christ is calling us to. And so how do we love people that we really don't like? How do we love when it's challenging or it comes with certain connotations that may lead us to be misunderstood. These were real tensions, but Jesus is calling them into accountability. Listen, I'm affirming you, but, I also have to hold you accountable to not compromise.

Thirdly, after Jesus gives them affirmation, he calls them into accountability. He gives them a clear action step or a clear course correction. And there's really just one word found in verse number 16. He says, repent, another exciting word that we love, not really. We don't love that word because of the connotation, but, let me see if I can help you think about it just a little bit differently. The word repent in the Greek is *metanoëo* and it literally means to change one's mind. And a changed mind is nothing but a change in direction. And listen, the only way you can change your mind and direction is when you come to a realization of something, you got a revelation that something isn't good or you need to make an adjustment or whatever the case may be. And maybe it's because of a consequence, something that you've seen or some knowledge that you have gained. Let me just give you a practical example of that. Anyone who's ever changed their diet knows what I'm talking about. Usually people who change their diet is because of some sort of circumstance, something that is causing them to feel like they need to eat better. I've got a brother of mine who has had a couple of health challenges and he's completely adjusted his diet, completely adjusted the way that he's eating and every time we get together and there's a group of us, he's always eating something different, you know. It kinda made me feel a little bit self-conscious that I'm eating apple pie and ice cream and he's eating an apple with peanut butter, you know. I'm like, Bro, you know, but I get it because of his health challenge or what he's realized and because of what he is now understanding about his body, he has changed his mind about food. He's changed his mind about what he is consuming. And it reminds me of what Paul says to us in Romans 12, verse two, he says, don't conform or be with the same form of the world. Like we're all around him eating some different things, but, Paul says, don't be conformed to that pattern of this world, but be transformed. Change your form or go in a different direction by the renewing of your mind. The 'i-n-g' suffix of renewing means that it needs to be ongoing. So, it's not just an acknowledgement that this is bad, it's not just an

acknowledgement that I need to change, it's not just an acknowledgement that, oh yeah, you're right. It's not just an empty apology of sorts, no; it is an active change, its living your life in a different direction, its literally changing your course. And I know that that's not always easy, especially when it goes against the grain of culture and we are called to do things like loving people when they least expect it and least deserve it. Or it's not doing things out of selfish ambition, but first looking to the needs of others. Is that not counter-cultural? Or it's forgiving people and loving them even when they're not sorry. Who feels like doing that? Raise your hand. I didn't think so.

No one in their natural mind would do these things. No one will respond this way. It doesn't make sense, it's not even rational. But listen, a transformed mind by God's spirit is not subject to the flesh, but it has to be connected to the spirit that produces an ongoing renewal because there are just some days that I don't feel like it is. There're some days when I really feel tempted to give you a natural piece of my mind, not a spiritual piece of my mind. And Jesus is saying, listen, I get it, you're doing some good things, but I'm holding you accountable for some stuff that you need to adjust, and here's the action step; you need to repent. You need to change your mind set.

Let me see if I can land the plane for us quickly this weekend. To wrap up his communication with the church of Pergamum where we land in verse number 17, and Jesus says...

*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.*

So, after Jesus affirms, he calls an accountability, he gives a proper action step, but then he tells us what's attainable if we do all of those things. You know, victory is attainable he says to those who hear and receive from the spirit. A few weeks ago I reached out to someone who is an interpreter for our deaf ministry because I was very, very curious as to how they would translate, 'he who has an ear to hear what the spirit is saying' to the deaf community and it was a very, very interesting conversation and this is what she shared with me and I'm going to share with you because I think the translation applies to all of us. She said, hearing is not about an audible voice or sound, but we would translate this into it's about paying attention and being capable of receiving. So, then I said what I thought when she shared this to me and I thought about it, this is really then about our posture, that's what this is about. The way we posture ourselves to be guided by the spirit is through prayer, that's the posture. And I love what Pastor Mark says, he says, prayer is the difference between the best you can do in the best that God can do. And here's the thing, this, this Holy Spirit that God has given us, it's been given to us according to Jesus to lead us and guide us into all truth. So, prayer allows us to get in tune with the Holy Spirit to lead us and guide us into all truth.

And then Jesus says, if you do that, I'll give you hidden manna. This was a reference to the Israelites coming out of an oppressive situation in Egypt in the book of Exodus, and he gave the manna which they didn't know where it came from, it was hidden. And what Jesus is saying, if you follow me, I will give you sustenance. I will feed you. I will give you the things that you need even though you don't see it. Then he says, I give you a white stone with a new name on it.

A black stone in the civic elections, the black stone was a no stone; the white stone was a yes stone. And so what Jesus is saying is I will not only give you hidden manna, I will not only feed you and give you sustenance, but I will give you victory with your name on it. So, obviously we can all take something from what Jesus is saying to the church at Pergamum, we can all apply it to our modern context, but I just want to drill down and push this a little bit because I think this is for someone specifically this weekend. Jesus is saying, I see you, you're doing some good stuff, you're headed in the right direction, but there are some things that need to be adjusted and you're prioritizing momentary comfort over the calling that I have for you. And if you would just about face and you would change your direction and go in a different way that I'm calling you, there's victory for you, there's everything that you need for you. And I know it's a tough situation. I don't know if it's a job. I don't know if it's a relationship. I don't know if it's an environment, but Jesus is saying, hey, go in a different direction. Because the reason why we often don't go in a different direction is and we say, well what about this? Or I need this or what's going to happen here? And Jesus is saying, I got the hidden manna for you. It's available for you and I will give you victory with your name on it.

Let's pray. God, we thank you for who you are. Thank you that you love us enough to affirm us. Tell us what we're doing good. You love us enough to also call us into accountability and say, hey, these things need to be adjusted in your life. They're going to lead you off track. Don't compromise in this area. Don't give in to the influences around you, although it's plausible and people would understand why. Just hang in there and make the adjustments and the way that you do that, the action step is to repent. God, help us to repent in the areas that we need to repent. Help us to change our minds. Help us to go in the direction that you are calling us. Help us to not prioritize our comfort and convenience over what you've called us to. Because in the end you said that you have hidden manna for us. You've got everything laid out that we need when we need it, even though we can't see it and we've got victory with our name on it. God, help us to trust that. Help us to trust that when the compromise looks like a good deal, but God help us to believe that you are who you say you are. And you will do what you say you will do. We need your help. These things we asked in your son Jesus' name. Amen.