



**July 6, 2014**

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**Letters to the Churches III – Pergamum Revelation 2:12-17**

**Note on the lesson: Pergamum varied between number one and number two among Roman cities in the region between the second century BC and second century AD, vying with the first in this list, Ephesus.**

**It was particularly strong in cultural and intellectual activities, and its main deity, Asclepius, was a god of healing, so the message of Christ the healer had a hard time catching on there. Here’s what Revelation has to say about the struggling church in Pergamum (lesson)**

I don’t know why, but the name “Pergamum” always makes me think of spices.

And that’s not a bad way to remember this church. It’s got a spicy problem, all sorts of immorality. The risen Christ’s message to its angel is a sword coming out of his mouth. I know that sounds strange, but it’s a common metaphor in Scripture, summarized in the phrase, “the Word of the Lord is sharper than any two-edged sword...” (Hebrews 4:12).

Think of it as cutting to the heart of any question, argument, or discussion; think of it as scattering the enemies of God.

Thus far, we've had a metaphor based on light for Ephesus (the seven stars in Christ's right hand); one based on the resurrection for Smyrna (who will suffer but prevail); and now, the "sword-words" that will cut to pieces the sin that surrounds them.

We are, today, in a situation much like Pergamum's church - immersed in a culture that seduces us, too often convinces us that it is more real than the faith we are called to live. It's easy to give in to; it takes place everywhere around us; and we too often don't even realize that we're sliding away from the Gospel of Jesus and into what seems so easy and fun.

One of these forces swirling around us that's doing the work of Satan is our mouths - our words, whether spoken or written, shared or not. The letter of James is very clear about this, in chapter three: he writes that the tongue is like a small flame of fire that can burn a whole forest down. We know about that, don't we?

This past week, watching the news, a familiar face popped up on the screen, and it wasn't a celebrity. The commentator said, "After the break, a historic moment took place today at Arlington," and Valerie and I both said, "It's Michelle! She got her fourth star!"

Sure enough, it was Michelle Janine Howard, who served as the chief engineer on the ship Valerie was chaplain for during the first Gulf War. Along with the Secretary of the Navy on her right and her Marine husband Wayne on her left, she was grinning with joy as they put her full Admiral shoulder boards on her summer white uniform. The same Michelle who had shared so much with Valerie, dinners with us (along with Wayne), who we'd heard was a three-star and commander of US Naval Surface Forces, became the first woman to make full Admiral in US history. She'd already been the first African-American woman to command a Navy vessel, commanded the ship (and the operation) that rescued Captain Phillips (the man whose ship was hijacked by Somali pirates), and now she's #2 in the Navy, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations. Couldn't have happened to a better person.

Naturally, I pulled out my phone (the one in my pocket), looked up the story, which had this great picture of her smile, and put it up on my Facebook page right away - but for some reason, the picture didn't come up, so I went to my computer and tried to do it right - the old-fashioned way(!).

That's when I noticed there were already comments on the story. I thought, "Wow, that quick!" and clicked on them. The first I saw was a really cheap, racist, awful hate-filled sentence.

And all I could think was, “Do you even know the first thing about this amazing person? If you did, you’d be begging to apologize. But probably not, because it feels good to post anonymous garbage for the world to get mad about, like I’m doing right now.”

It’s a fair guess that we’ve all done something like this - oh, not *just* like this; more like a few well-chosen words, a wise-crack, or a quick email; maybe a joke at another’s expense at a party or in a letter.

I’ve done it. And it’s wrong. Is there a specific passage in the Bible about hateful comments on the internet? Well, not specifically, but how about, “You shall not lie about another person?” Or the famous words of Jesus himself: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Or the third chapter of James?

See how easy it is to get trapped into a simple, easy, attractive, even fun sin? But it’s not, really; it’s ugly, and the same warning given to the church at Pergamum applies to us: “Why do you indulge that crowd?...I’m about to cut them to pieces!”

Living the life of faith is not easy; there are slippery places everywhere, even in our - even in my - attempts to be cute, to be funny, to fit in. So, watch your mouth, lest your tongue lead you into even worse places.

One more thing: the stone. That stone gets people’s attention, too; it’s a very cool-sounding thing, with a new, secret name on it. These

things fascinate us today; science fiction and other cultures have exposed us to the idea of “secret names,” one public, the other known only to a select few. For this series of sermons, instead of looking at modern commentators, we’ve been going back to some of the earliest records of people teaching on these texts, some of them within just a few years of their writing. Now, Peterson in *The Message* calls the stone clear; other translations say white. There’s lots of interesting modern speculation about what it means, but the Church Revelation was written for saw this stone as the famous Pearl of Great Price in Jesus’ parable, the one that’s worth selling everything you have to get. And that pearl is Christian faith.

That secret name? Something that followers of Jesus had only recently begun being called: “Christian” - a secret name for certain when it was against the law to be one. Some of these early writers felt that it said, “Witness” - witness, a person who testifies to the truth of Jesus Christ. What better name *could* you be called?

Guard against the easy sins of our world, which are there for people of every political, theoretical, and theological bent, and strive for the true wealth of the stone, the pearl, inscribed with the greatest of names: Witness to Jesus the Christ, who rose from death to take away our sin, and made it possible to celebrate this feast of Holy Communion with him - and all who share this name, which we cannot keep secret.

