

Getting Our Relationship With Society Right

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Thank you so much, Phil. Yes, we're going to turn back to the passage that we looked at in Revelation. At the moment, we are going through chapters 2 and 3 of this fascinating book and we're studying these short letters that were written to seven different churches across Asia Minor or Turkey, as we would call it today. Our series is called Getting the Basics Right. And as we approach these letters, we're wanting to try and make sure that we put in place some of the key emphasis that should shape our lives as believers. It's important that when we approach these letters, we remember that they were written to churches, they were written primarily to believers. We've come back several times to this important version, chapter 1, telling us that Jesus is speaking to those who he loves and those whom he has freed by his blood. You may remember that we've been highlighting the fact that these believers were facing opposition and persecution for their faith and Revelation is written for one big reason. It's to give them encouragement. And so as we're battling on as Christians or as we may be thinking about whether or not we want to be Christians or not, encouragement is definitely something that we all need. As Phil mentioned, our order of the letters is a wee bit out of sync because today we're coming to the third letter, even though this is actually, I think, our fifth church that we're looking at. We were supposed to look at Pergamum three weeks ago, but as you know, I tested positive for COVID. And so although we felt fine, we were confined to our house for 10 days. So Phil very kindly was happy to reorder things and he took us through Thyatira and Sardis. So now we're going back to Pergamum and we'll resume the right order next week when we come to Philadelphia.

Our title today is Getting Our Relationship With Society Right. And let me read again verses 12 and 13. To the angel of the church in Pergamum right, the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword, 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 anti-pass my faithful witness who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. So once when you're reading a passage in the Bible, a word or a phrase can jump out at you. And when I was looking at this passage, the phrase that jumped out at me was the words that you have there in verse 12 where Jesus says, no, where Jesus, in verse 13 rather, where Jesus says, I know where you live, where Satan's throne is. Now these words instantly make this letter absolutely fascinating because it's telling us that in the great conflict between the kingdom of

God and the kingdom of evil, which in many ways shapes the whole of revelation and shapes the whole of history, in terms of that conflict, Pergamum is a stronghold of enemy territory.

In other words, it was a city that was in the grip of evil influence. And that meant that the society that these believers lived in was full of people and customs and expectations that were all totally opposed to God. In other words, these Christians lived in a totally un-Christian city. But that's where they dwell. And that means that these disciples are going to have to live and work and shop and study and socialize and witness in a community where sin and idolatry are normal and where being a Christian is weird. They live there. They have to stay there. And that's why they've got to get their relationship with that society right. And I'm not sure if we could be reading a passage of scripture that's more relevant for us today because the majority of the culture around us has long since rejected Jesus. And instead, there are dozens and dozens of areas of life where being sinful is just being normal and following Jesus makes you weird. That's where we dwell today. And that's why we've got to make sure that we get our relationship with that society right as well.

Faced with that kind of situation where you're living as Christians in an un-Christian society, the default tactic that Christians can often jump to is hiding. And there's two ways in which we can hide. One is to run away. The other is to blend in. So to illustrate that, imagine there was two foreign students who came to study in Glasgow. While they were there, trouble erupted in their home country and they didn't want to return. But they can't afford visas. They're not allowed to stay in the country. So they decide to go into hiding.

[5 : 15] One of them could come to Carlyway. Miles from anywhere. Get a house that no one goes anywhere near. Keep themselves to themselves. Mind their own business and just hope that they could stay hidden. That the other one stays in Glasgow. Gets a flat, works hard at perfecting a Glasgow accent, lives, works and socializes in the way that everybody else does. And if you saw them, they wouldn't stand out at all. So one has run away. The other is blending in. Both of them are hiding. As Christians, in terms of our relationship with society, we can very often do exactly the same thing. Many Christians look at the culture around us and the way things are going and they see the incompatibility of what we believe and of how they behave. And so we decide to hide. Some people do it by running away. Not to another place, but into a church bubble. Where we cut ourselves off as much as possible. We minimize involvement with society around us. And we try to create this kind of pure environment where we can dwell and hide. Other Christians, though, hide by blending in. So they just go along with what everybody else is doing. They're happy to kind of compromise on moral decisions. Maybe we'll keep our Sunday routine. We'll come to church on a Sunday and we'll keep that going. But Monday to Friday and Saturday, we don't want to stand out. It's much easier to blend in. And so that means that we can think of two Christians. One of them spends all their time at church events. They read only Christian books. They only spend time with other Christians. And they make sure that they avoid anything that would be considered worldly. The other goes out and about, blends in. Spends time with any friends, drinks what they drink, watch what they watch, laugh at what they laugh at. And they chase after the things that are going to impress other people. Those two Christians look incredibly different, but they're both doing exactly the same thing. They're both hiding. And interestingly, it's important to recognize that both of those aspects of hiding are massively off-putting to people who aren't yet believers. When we make it look like being a Christian means cutting yourself off into this kind of elite church bubble. That's going to put people off, A, because it makes other people feel very inferior.

And B, it makes Christianity look very restricting. And yet neither of those are the Gospel. The Gospel is a message of grace and mercy. It's never about being an elite group that's better than everybody else. And the Gospel is not restricting. It's the most liberating message that the world has ever heard. So cutting ourselves off is off-putting to unbelievers.

But on the other hand, when we make it look like Christianity, being a Christian just means just blending in with everybody else and doing what everybody else is doing, that's going to put people off because, A, it makes us look like hypocrites, because what we claim to believe and how we behave don't match up. And B, it makes our faith look shallow. Because if we want to be attractive to unbelievers around us, then one thing that's absolutely crucial is that they've got to be able to see that we're genuine. And that what we believe, we really mean it with what we believe. All of this is telling us that as we live today in an un-Christian society, which we do, hiding is not the answer. It's not going to help us grow in our discipleship. It's not going to help us in terms of our witness to unbelievers.

So what do we do? How do we get our relationship with society right? If you are a Christian, how do you get that right? If you are thinking about being a Christian or not sure what's it going to look like when you are a Christian? How do we get our relationship with society right? Well, the letter to Paragymn can help us. And as we look at this letter, we are going to discover that the believers here were getting one thing right, but they were in danger of getting another thing wrong. And we're going to look at these two in a little bit more detail. So first of all, let's think about what they got right. In verse 13, Jesus commends these believers because in the midst of all that was going on, they didn't run away and hide. You can see that there in verse 13. They live where Satan's throne is. But do you notice what Jesus doesn't tell him to do? He doesn't tell him to leave.

And that's all the more remarkable when we learn a little bit more about what Paragymn was like at the end of the first century. As we've been saying, Revelation was written around 95, 96 AD. It was during a period when the church was being persecuted by the Roman Empire. And the reason for that persecution was what's known as the imperial cult. Basically the idea that the Roman Emperor was a god and that he should be worshipped. So in Paragymn, there was and throughout the Roman Empire at this time, there was the expectation that people living in the Empire would be willing to say Caesar is Lord. They'd go to the temple, burn incense, they would say Caesar is Lord. Now for a Christian, that's blasphemy. The whole of Christianity is grounded on the fact that only Jesus is Lord. Paragymn was a centre for this imperial cult. It had a temple dedicated to the Roman Emperor. It actually had tons of other temples to all sorts of other Greco-Roman deities like Zeus and many others. So you had the temple with the emperors to be worshipped. It was also an important administrative centre, regional administrative centre for the Romans. And it had this status as a kind of key location for governing the Empire. So that meant that on the one hand you had the temple where you're supposed to go and worship the Emperor. And on the other hand, you had the administrative headquarters where the local governor is watching to make sure that you do it. And so the result was that Paragymn was a dangerous place to be different. And that's quite possibly why

[12:18] Antipas was killed for his faith, as you can see there in verse 13. In the midst of all of that, the believers got one thing right. They didn't run away. Instead, they held fast to Jesus' name.

You can see that they, in verse 13. And I love the way it's used in that language, that they held fast. It's such a good phrase because it speaks to us of how dependable Jesus is. You think of all that these people were facing, all the challenges of their environment. In the midst of all that, they could hold on to Jesus. And that dependability of Jesus is reinforced by what it says in verse 12, when it talks about Jesus being the one with a sharp two-edged sword. That's such an important truth for these believers in Paragymn to know because they're supposed to be going to the temple, the governor standing here. And what's the governor got hanging over them? He's got a sword.

He's the one who can execute them if they don't conform. And so there's this huge pressure. It's like, well, if we don't conform to what the Romans expect, they're going to kill us. This letter is saying Jesus is the one with a sword, not Rome. Jesus is the one who has authority. Jesus is the one who knows the truth. Jesus is the one who will ultimately execute judgment. He will call every injustice to account. That's where they can hold fast to him with confidence. And it's a great reminder that when you hold fast to Jesus, you are holding on to an immovable rock. That's why when you imagine yourself holding fast to Jesus, you shouldn't kind of think of yourself kind of dangling off a cliff by your fingernails. You might imagine yourself hanging off that balcony thinking, well, I'm holding fast to Jesus as tight as I possibly can. It's not like that. A far better image to have in your head would be to imagine a baby holding on to someone's index finger.

Because when a baby holds on to an index finger, what really happens is that the rest of the grown-up's hand is actually holding the baby. And that's exactly what it's like with Jesus. We're holding fast to him, but actually he's holding us. He's keeping us safe and secure. And in all the fleeting, changing, unreliability of life around us, we desperately need something that we can actually hold on to. And you go into the society around us, you look at work, life around us. People are all trying to hold on to stuff that's going to slip away. So we hold on to our looks. Well, those of us who had looks in the first place, tried to hold on to them. Obviously, I didn't. We hold on to our health. You know, we were always fighting against ill health. We're holding on to our possessions, holding on to our relationships, either with parents, children, friends, husband's wives.

Hold on to our careers. Maybe even hold on to our past. One day, all of those things will let you go. Jesus won't. Jesus never will. We can hold fast to him.

[15 : 47] But that phrase, hold fast, is also important because it also describes what life can be like as a Christian. The reason that we have to hold fast as Christians is because very often the tide or the wind can be against us. We've all known that since this week. You go outside, the gales have been blowing. Sometimes you just have to hold fast. And that's often, that's very much what it's like living as a Christian in an un-Christian society. The tide is against you. And that will mean that being a Christian at school or at work or in the football team or maybe even in your family is often going to mean that you have to be different. But the key point is that the answer is not to run away. The answer is to hold fast to Jesus. Hold on to him. Keep looking to him, even if, even if you have to swim against the current, what everyone around you is doing.

Now, the consequence of that is that you're very likely to face moral dilemmas. Everybody faces moral dilemmas if you have a conscience. But as Christians, we're going to face maybe more of them at times. So tomorrow you might start a conversation with someone, maybe someone phones you or maybe it's a text conversation. And that conversation might quickly descend into gossip or into criticism that is dishonoring to God. There's a moral dilemma right there. Do you carry on or do you stop? You might be out with friends and you have a meal, you have a drink. They want to drink more. They want to drink more than you know is wise. They want to drink to excess.

What are you going to do? You have to know where to stop. You might even be on your own, battling with temptation of lust or revenge or greed in these dilemmas with God to hold fast to Jesus. And the key point is that you don't need to run into a Christian bubble in order to hold fast to Jesus. You don't need to run away and hide and lock yourself away from the world in order to hold on to Jesus. Because the amazing thing about Jesus is that if you live in the middle of an un-Christian city like Pergamum or an un-Christian city, unsaved Christian society like Scotland today, if that's where you dwell, Jesus is right there with you at every step.

At every moment right in the middle of an un-Christian society, you can hold fast to Jesus because he's there. We are all going about our daily lives in schools, in colleges, in workplaces and in communities that are becoming increasingly un-Christian. As you live and work in a society like that at every single moment, there is never a second when you cannot hold fast to Jesus and when he's not right there with you. So that's what they were getting right, but they were also at risk of getting something very wrong. As we said, they were commended by Jesus because they didn't run away. The problem though is that they are in great danger of blending in. That's the two ways you can hide, either run away or blend in. They're not running away, but they're at risk of blending in. You can see that in these verses that I've highlighted on the screen. I'll just read them and then we can explain them a little bit because some of it's not that clear immediately. Jesus says, I've got a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaim, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food, sacrifice to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans, therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. Now, what on earth is all that about? Well, Balaim was a fascinating figure in the Old Testament. You can read about him in the second half of the book of Numbers during the period when Israel had left Egypt and were preparing to enter the Promised Land. Basically,

Balaim was a dodgy prophet. So when you read Balaim, think dodgy prophet. He was hired by Balak, who was the king of the Midianites, and he was hired because Balak was like, Balaim, come and curse these Israelites because they're a threat to me. So Balaim was supposed to come and pronounce a curse on the Israelites in order to help Balak overcome them. But what happened was every time Balaim opened his mouth, he actually blessed the Israelites instead of pronouncing a curse. And the whole thing becomes a bit of a fash. It would be a little bit like Boris Johnson hiring a spokesman to go out to the press every day to deny any wrongdoing in terms of breaching COVID regulations.

[20 : 50] And then the spokesman says, yeah, I'll do that. I'll go and deny everything. And they come up to the microphone and they say, yeah, he was at a party. Yes, he was drinking. Yes, he did it dozens of times. Yes. And it would be a complete fash. That's exactly what happened. Balaim was supposed to curse Israel. But yet every time he opened his mouth, it was actually a blessing. So it was a very fascinating and, I know, we quite amusing incident. But in the midst of all of that, Balaim also managed to get the Israelites. And he did it by devising a plan to get Midianite women to seduce the Israelites, Israelite men. We have to kind of piece together a couple of bits of evidence from numbers to discover this. But you can see it on the screen there, numbers 25 and numbers 31. The people of Israel began to sin with the daughters of Moab. They were being seduced by the women, bringing them into their marion, them and basically bowing down to the Midianite gods. And you discover from verse 16 of chapter 31 that it was Balaim who kind of came up with this plan. It was on their, his advice that the people of Israel had been led astray. In terms of Pergamum back in Revelation, Jesus is warning them that some of the people here are in danger of doing exactly the same thing. Now all of this might sound weird, but it makes sense immediately when we step into the world of Greco-Roman religion, politics and economics. So in your mind, you live in Pergamum at the end of the first century. Imagine yourself living on a street there. In that city, your religion, your politics and your job are all connected. Now it's hard for us to imagine that today because these things are kept so separate. Back in those days it wasn't like that at all. So politically, you're a Roman emperor voter because if you're not that then you're dead. And in normal circumstances, Christians would have been that too. Christians were to honour the emperor as long as it didn't mean denying Jesus. Christians were not revolutionaries or insurrectionists. So politically, everybody is just like, get the emperors, the emperor, that's fine. Religiously, however, in Pergamum in 1895, you're not just an emperor voter, you're an emperor worshipper. And that's where the problems came for these believers because they couldn't do that. Economically, this had huge effects because in terms of your job, you were an emperor pleaser. And the implications of not pleasing the emperor were huge. If you didn't conform, if you didn't go along with what society was doing, then you were at risk of being ostracised. And so if you weren't sacked, you would certainly be overlooked in terms of providing work. If you were perhaps running a business, a joiner or something like that, or a leather worker or something, if you're not fitting in with what society is doing, people are going to just bypass you and you'll lose your income and you'll face poverty and destitution. So you had to conform, you had to think, well, okay, I'm going to stick with the crowd, I'll go where everybody's going.

What that meant was you had to get involved in the local cycle pattern of feasting and meeting together as a community. And all of that was tied in work, religion, politics. So there's like a feast for the emperor. Everybody goes, you go there, you meet people, you get work, you build up relationships. It's all kind of common sense, really. As part of that, the feasting would often be lavish. The emperor worship, part of that would involve sexual encounters with cult prostitutes. So often in these days, temples, there are women who are effectively, like religious prostitutes because so often the religious activities and beliefs of the Greco-Roman was tied in with sexual behavior. To give an example, the kind of idea is, you're a farmer, you want your crops to grow. You grow to the god of fertility, you meet a prostitute at the temple, you have sex, that pleases the god, your crops are going to grow. That's the kind of idea that was so widespread in that Greco-Roman religion. And if you didn't conform, then you're putting your head in the block. That meant that there was a huge temptation to blend in. And that seems to be what Jesus is talking about in these verses. Those who are holding the teaching of Balaim are basically saying, it's okay to do that. It's okay to go to the temple. It's okay to eat and drink whatever they're drinking. It's okay to do whatever everybody else is doing with the women at the temple. In other words, it's okay to compromise. And it seems to be the case that these Nicolaitans were teaching the same thing. Now, we don't know exactly what the Nicolaitans taught, but there's an indication here that it's the same kind of thing. Because if you look at that word there that says so also, that's the word thus, it can also be translated likewise. It's basically saying the same kind of thing is happening with the Nicolaitans.

There's this huge temptation to blend in. Now, before we jump to the conclusion and say, oh, all this sounds so weird, temples, imperial cult, all this kind of stuff, before you think, you know, this sounds like ancient history, it all boils down to food, drink, money, sex, and following the crowd. And if you think that that's irrelevant today, then you are blind. And the key point for these Christians in Pergamum is that they were in huge danger of hiding by blending in. And we can be exactly the same. We're surrounded by a society that thinks it's normal to sleep with anyone who's willing. It's normal to go out the weekends and get hammered. It's normal to make sure that you go along with what society expects. And as Christians, we can be very tempted to hide by blending in. And that pressure, that can come through two things. One is that we can pursue pleasure. We want a moment's pleasure. But the other thing is that we can often be pressured into doing it. Pleasure and pressure, the two things combine and we think we must conform. A great example of that is the 12 year old who drinks a bottle of beer. Every 12 year old, they get a bottle of beer, they drink it, inside they're going, that is utterly revolting. And to their men, to their mates, they're like, oh, it's great, isn't it? Because everyone just has to fit in.

There's that pressure. And it's all showing us that there are going to be certain aspects of our conduct as Christians that in the eyes of solidarity around us are just weird. So today, it's weird not to sleep with someone until you're married to them. It's weird to say, I'm happy to have a beer, but I am not going to get drunk. It's weird to give away a tenth of what you earn to the church.

And it's weird to freely forgive somebody who hurts you. So what do we do? Run away? That's tempting too, but that's not the answer. The answer is to know where our boundaries lie. As Christians, we've got to live in this society that's all around us, but we've also got to be ready to be different. And we've got to be prepared to stop when other people around us are perfectly happy to carry on. Jesus sums this up perfectly.

[29 : 02] I love the fact that Jesus can say in one sentence what I can barely say in half an hour. He says, I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

In that prayer, Jesus is saying, I don't want you to run away. You need to be in the world, but he's also saying, I don't want you to blend in. We need to be kept from the evil one.

So how do we get that right? How exactly are we going to put that into practice in our lives in the wig ahead? Well, I think that the answer is in verse 13. Jesus commends the believers here because they did not deny him. And I think that that phrase is so helpful because it's recognizing that we need to live in a society that's around us. You all need to go to work tomorrow. You all need to be involved in the community. You need to meet people for a coffee at Kriyanavatar, Kalanesh or Gyarnin or whatever it may be. You need to be in contact with friends.

We all need to live in our society, even though it might often feel like it's a place where Satan dwells, but we need to do that in a way that does not deny Jesus. And I think that if we remember that, it's going to really help us to see where the boundaries have to lie in terms of what we should do and in terms of what we shouldn't do. In other words, when you're facing a situation, whether that's in a relationship or with friends or at work or in your family, if you're facing that moral dilemma of whether to do something or not do it, a really good question to ask yourself is this, do I need to deny Jesus in order to do this? Or to put it another way, do you need to pretend that Jesus isn't with you in order to do this? Remember we said a wee moment ago that the reason we can hold fast to Jesus no matter what we're facing or where we are is because he's always with us. And so thinking about denying him in terms of a form of conduct or behaviour, ask yourself the question, do I need to pretend that he's not here in order to do this?

So take feasting. We don't use the term feasting, we use the term going out, but it's the same thing. You can go out, have a meal, have a lovely meal, have a nice glass of wine or have a beer or whatever, have a great laugh with friends. Is it okay to do that? Of course it is. Jesus himself did it many, many times. You don't need to put Jesus to one side in order to do that, but if the drinking reaches the level where everyone's losing control and everyone's getting drunk, for you to go with them, you've got to pretend that Jesus isn't there. Same with sex. In the security of marriage, you can enjoy all the precious intimacy that God has given us in a sexual relationship. You don't need to pretend that Jesus isn't there to do that. It's absolutely what he's created and what he wants.

[32 : 04] But if you want intimacy without any obligation to provide security, if you want pleasure for a moment without making any promises for a lifetime, then you have to leave Jesus behind if you want to step over that line. Same applies if you're looking at something online. That's something a lot of people struggle with. There's a website you think that you want to look at. Ask yourself the question, do I need to pretend that Jesus isn't here in order to do that? And the same principle can be applied every time we feel pressure to hide by blending in. We can only blend in with the society around us if we hide Jesus. God forbid that we ever think that that's a good idea.

It's really helpful to ask ourselves the question, do I have to put Jesus to one side in order to do this? I've got two minutes before I'm stopping. So how do we get our relationship with society right? Well, the key point in all of this sermon is that the answer is not to hide.

We cannot hide. We must not hide by running away. We must not hide by blending in. Instead, we must keep holding fast to Jesus. Even though that means that we might have to be different, we are not going to deny him. And that's going to shape our relationship with society. It's always going to be shaped by the reality of our relationship with him, by the fact that he's with us. Two crucial points to finish with that come from the end of this letter. Number one, none of this is minor. And you only need to read the words of verse 16 to see that. None of this is trivial.

And if we are blending in or if we are running and hiding, that's something that we must repent of as we have this word that's come up again and again in these letters. None of this is minor. Two, none of this is easy. And Jesus recognizes that. In verse 17, we have these fascinating words.

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I'll give him some of the hidden manna and I'll give him a white stone with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives this. Now, this is a fascinating verse because it's a wee bit hard to understand. Manna refers obviously to what God provided to the Israelites in the Exodus, this kind of bread that was on the ground a bit like Jew in the morning that they could eat. What is the white stone? Well, no one really knows.

[34 : 46] Lots of people have looked at that and there's lots of different theories as to what the white stone refers to. I'm not really sure it matters what the stone refers to because the important bit is this bit, the bit that is so personal. The stone is given with a name written on it that no one knows except the one who receives it. The emphasis there is on the personal nature of what Jesus is going to give those who remain faithful to him. And in the context of Pergamum in 95 AD and in the context of Scotland in 2022, these promises that we have here are exactly what we need because you think to yourself, you know, if I don't go out with my mates, if I don't think what everybody else does, if I don't socialize in the way that they're doing, if I don't fit in, I'm going to go hungry and I'm going to be lonely.

Isn't that the fear? So if I don't go along with what everyone else is doing, I'm going to miss out and if I don't go along with them, they're not going to want me and I'm going to be on my own and I'm going to feel cut off. I'm going to be hungry and lonely. Jesus says, I will give you manna, I will feed you, I will always feed you so that you will never be left empty. And Jesus says, I'm going to give you a stone that's got your name in it and it's so personal that only you will know it. In other words, I love you and I value you so much. You're not going to be hungry, you're not going to be lonely. I will never, ever let you down. That's why Jesus is the one who's worth holding fast to. That's why when we live in an un-Christian society, the best thing any of us can do this week and for the rest of our lives is hold fast to Him. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, you know where we dwell and you know that in so many ways, Satan has strong holds in our society. As we live in that society this week and for the rest of our lives, we want to hold fast to you. Please help us to do so. Amen.