

SERIES: Letters from Jesus to Eight Churches
SERMON: To Pergamum: The Too Free Church
SCRIPTURE: Revelation 2:12-17
SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus
DATE: May 14, 2006

Freedom is one of the greatest words in the English language. It's also a great biblical term. Paul wrote in Galatians 5:13, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free." And one of my all-time favorite verses is this: "If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed." I really believe in Christian freedom, which I would define as the liberty to make my own doctrinal decisions and lifestyle choices under the boundaries of Scripture and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Outside those parameters I react strongly when other people try to tell me what to believe or how to behave, and I don't like to do that to them.

Furthermore, I have been greatly blessed to be part of the *Free Church* for over 30 years now. That term got into our denominational name because our forefathers valued freedom in their churches. In Europe where they lived in the 1800's every country had a state church that owned the church buildings, paid the pastors' salaries and, of course, exercised a good bit of political control over the churches. And if it wasn't a government exercising that control, it was an ecclesiastical hierarchy—a bishop or a presbytery. The early Free Church founders valued the priesthood of the believer and local control over a church's affairs; that's why they called themselves "free." I believe in that strongly myself. I am proud to be Free Church.

But is it possible to have too much of a good thing? Can you remember a time when you ate too much candy, had too much fun in the sun, or maybe even enjoyed too much freedom so that you got into serious trouble? I can think of several such experiences as I was growing up, but I think I will spare you the gory details. Freedom, when taken too far, can actually become another kind of slavery. Let's finish Paul's thought in Galatians 5:13, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature."

The church we are going to study about today in the third installment of our series on Letters from Jesus to Eight Churches, is the one located at Pergamum, the capital city of the province of Asia in the Roman empire. This was not the Free Church but "The *Too Free Church*," because the believers there used their Christian liberty unwisely to the point of actually being threatened by Jesus with a sword. Frankly, there may be no greater danger for American Christianity today than what we read in this passage. So let's pay close attention so that our church doesn't become the "Too Free Church of Wichita." Listen carefully; then you be the judge as to whether that could happen here. Rev. 2:12-17:

"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 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, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it."

I'm going to approach this letter a little differently than the others. You can just set your outline aside for the first 20 minutes, because I am going to focus on the story of a man mentioned in this letter, Balaam—a man who pushed freedom so far that his bad influence was still having a disastrous effect on God's people in Pergamum 1500 years after he died; in fact, it is still affecting the church today.

Surely Balaam's story is one of the most unusual in the entire Bible. As most of you know, Moses the Prince of Egypt, led the people of Israel out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and through the wilderness for nearly 40 years. Finally they arrived on the plains of Moab (modern-day Jordan), on the very doorstep of the Promised land, right across the Jordan River from the city of Jericho. The people whose land they were traveling through, the Moabites, were scared to death to have this huge nation of 2+ million people passing through their borders, even though Moses promised that they wouldn't leave the highway and would pay for any food they needed or any damage they caused.

The King of Moab, a man named Balak, realized he didn't have the military power to fight the Israelites, so he hired Balaam the prophet to put a curse on Israel. Balaam was apparently a professional sorcerer or magician from Babylon (modern-day Iraq), quite knowledgeable concerning the various tribal gods of the surrounding nations.¹ King Balak said, (Numbers 22:5ff),

"A people has come out of Egypt; they cover the face of the land and have settled next to me. Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me. Perhaps then I will be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed."

The elders of Moab and Midian left, taking with them the fee for divination (Remember that; it's very important to the story). When they came to Balaam, they told him what Balak had said.

"Spend the night here," Balaam said to them, "and I will bring you back the answer the LORD gives me." So the Moabite princes stayed with him.

God came to Balaam and asked, "Who are these men with you?"

Balaam said to God, "Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: 'A people that has come out of Egypt covers the face of the land. Now come and put a curse on them for me. Perhaps then I will be able to fight them and drive them away.'"

But God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed."

The next morning Balaam got up and said to Balak's princes, "Go back to your own country, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you."

So the Moabite princes returned to Balak and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."

Then Balak sent other princes, more numerous and more distinguished than the

first. They came to Balaam and said:

"This is what Balak son of Zippor says: Do not let anything keep you from coming to me, because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me."

But Balaam answered them, "Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God."

Your initial reaction to what I just read might well be that this Balaam looks like a model prophet. But that would be a jumping to a premature conclusion because it wouldn't take into consideration his real heart attitude. In fact, we can learn a very important truth from this man, namely that a person can do all the right things, say all the right things, and even be used powerfully by God and still not please God.

First, Balaam was careful to *do* the right things. When first approached about putting a curse on Israel he immediately sought God's will on the matter. After all, Balaam was a professional, and he knew that before laying a curse on any people, it is wise to ask permission from the god of that people.ⁱⁱ But what Balaam probably didn't fully appreciate is that Israel's God was not just a second-rate tribal deity like so many others but rather the creator and sustainer of the entire universe. At least to his credit he doesn't argue with Israel's God. He simply tells the delegation, "Go back to your own country, for Israel's god, the Lord, has refused to let me go with you." As we will soon see, however, Balaam's heart is not nearly as obedient as his actions.

Not only can a person *do* all the right things and not please God; a person can also *say* all the right things and still not please God. If we find Balaam's actions faultless, what do we discover about his words? Well, let's pick up the story in verse 19, where he speaks further to the second group of emissaries of Balak:

"Now stay here tonight as the others did, and I will find out what else the LORD will tell me."

That night God came to Balaam and said, "Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you."

Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab. But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him.

Let me stop here and address a problem that confronts us, namely God's anger at Balaam. Why is God angry that Balaam goes with the messengers to meet Balak when in verse 20 God *told* him to go with them? I think the answer is found in the difference between God's directive will and his permissive will. God's directive will was given back in verse 12: "Do *not* go with them." But his permissive will came in to play when Balaam began to negotiate. Did you notice the subtle way in which he tried to change God's mind. Look at it: "I will find out what *else* the Lord will tell me." He didn't really need to find anything further out—God had already told him plainly not to go. But he wanted to see if there was any negotiating room. And God, who knew that Balaam's heart was rebellious, gave him permission to go and then proceeded to discipline

him for doing so. Friends, it can be very dangerous to say “please, may I” to God after He has revealed His will. *He* may relent, but *you* may be sorry.

A second problem in the story is Balaam’s unique donkey. Read a little further with me, from Numbers 22:23-34:

Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, she turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat her to get her back on the road.

Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between two vineyards, with walls on both sides. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat her again.

Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat her with his staff. Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and she said to Balaam, (I don't know what kind of accent a donkey has, so I can't imitate it, but here are the words she spoke:) "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"No," he said.

Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell face down.

The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me. The donkey saw me and turned away from me these three times. If she had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared her."

Balaam said to the angel of the LORD, "I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back.""

The essential problem here is, of course, the whole notion of a donkey acting like a person. We don't think much of it when a person acts like a donkey, because we see that all the time, don't we? Many people, of course, write this whole story off as a fairy tale.ⁱⁱⁱ But making a donkey talk is peanuts to a God who created the world, made a dry path across the Red Sea and the Jordan River, raised Jesus from the dead, and saved you from your sin! Frankly, I am less amazed by the fact that his donkey talked to Balaam than I am that Balaam talked back to the donkey! But Candid Camera demonstrated years ago that people will talk to mailboxes, trees, just about anything that talks to them first.

What we discover in the Scripture we have just read is that Balaam *says* the right things. When he learns that his donkey has only been trying to protect him from the angel of the Lord, his verbal response to the angel is right on: “I have sinned... Now if you are displeased, I will go back.” You can't ask for any clearer statement of repentance or willingness to change than that,

can you? And then in the next two chapters we find Balaam repeatedly affirming his commitment to speak only the truth. Again and again he says, “Must I not speak what the Lord puts in my mouth?” Yet Balaam’s heart, we shall see, is not in his words.

Now I want you to realize that not only can a person do all the right things and say all the right things without pleasing God, he can even be used powerfully by God and still not please Him. Some people seem to have bought into the notion that success in ministry validates a person’s lifestyle and beliefs. It doesn’t. There have been many clergy who accomplished great things, built large churches, wrote best-selling books, and won many converts, but their private lives were a shambles.

The fact is, God can use anyone He wants, to do anything he wants. Some of the people He has used down through the centuries were people we would never choose. He used Joseph's evil brothers, allowing them to sell him into slavery, in order to accomplish His purpose of saving Israel from being starved in a famine decades later. He used Pharaoh's own daughter to spare the life of the baby Moses, the future deliverer and leader of His people, whom Pharaoh himself had placed under a death sentence. He used the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar to discipline the Jewish People. He used the Persian King Cyrus to bring the Jews back to their homeland. He used Jewish exorcists to cast out demons in Jesus’ name, even though they didn’t even believe in Him.

The fact that Balaam was used powerfully by God is indisputable. He delivered four great prophecies of blessing on Israel, all recorded for us in the 23rd and 24th chapters of Numbers. After the third one, Balak the king was so upset that he said to Balaam (24:10): “I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these three times. Now leave at once and go home! I said I would reward you handsomely, but the Lord has kept you from being rewarded.”^{iv}

However, it is possible to highly successful on the outside may be totally phony and spiritually bankrupt on the inside. Certainly that was true of Balaam. To please God a person must not only do the right thing, and say the right thing, and be used by God; a person’s motives must be pure. And Balaam’s weren’t! He was essentially a hollow, hypocritical man. He is mentioned in eight different books of the Bible—five in the OT and three in the NT, and every single mention of him outside of Numbers 22-24 is extremely negative. What we learn from 2 Peter and Jude is that Balaam was motivated by greed. He kept negotiating with God because he desperately desired the huge fee Balak promised.

Worse yet, he conspired to bring about the defeat of God’s people. Apparently what happened is that after Balaam was sent home without his reward by Balak, he couldn’t stand the thought of losing all that money. So he contacted Balak again and told him something like this (reading between the lines of our text in Revelation 2, which says that “Balaam taught Balak to entice the Israelites”):

“I can't help you defeat Israel by putting a curse on them because Israel's God won't let me, but I think I've come up with a way you can get them to defeat themselves. Push the envelope of freedom! Undermine their morals. Invite them to your temple for a

little fellowship and after they get there, have some of your temple babes do a little dirty dancing, and when the Israelite men crash and burn, their own God will destroy them for you.”

And that’s exactly what happened! You can read about it in Numbers 25 and 31. And I suspect Balak paid Balaam handsomely for this juicy tip.

Friends, Satan is still using such methods today. If he can’t destroy a ministry through a frontal assault on its doctrine or its leadership, he will launch a sneak attack, using greed, immorality, gossip, quarrels, fights, divisiveness—whatever it takes. Mostly he promotes friendship with the world as a way of getting believers to compromise their faith.

Now let’s examine the letter to the church at Pergamum in some detail.

Background and setting (12)

The sword of the Savior. Jesus introduces Himself by a different title in every one of these letters. In His letter to the church at Pergamum he describes Himself in pretty graphic terms as “He who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” Why does Jesus employ this symbol for Himself? In Hebrews 4:12 we read these words, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” That is speaking of the written Word of God. But the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ, is also connected with the sharp, double-edged sword, probably indicating that He is more powerful than His greatest enemies, including Satan. This is important, because the city of Pergamum is identified by Jesus as “The City of Satan.”

The City of Satan. Isn’t that a terrible reputation for a city to have? We like to name our cities: St Louis is The Gateway to the West; New York is The Big Apple; New Orleans, The Big Easy; Denver, The Mile High City. But for Jesus to call a place “the City of Satan” indicates the believers there must have faced tremendous opposition. It’s important for them, therefore, to know that the Lord of their church is the One who has the sharp, double-edged sword. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

By the way, how do you think Pergamum earned this title? Some have suggested it is because of the fact that the acropolis standing one thousand feet over the city was crowned by a huge altar dedicated to Zeus. It was a great chair, or throne, forty feet high, and any citizen could look up there at any time and see what Jesus calls “Satan’s throne.” But it is more likely this title was earned because Pergamum was the first city of Asia to openly support the Imperial cult with its worship of the Emperor as the Most High God.

Jesus praises the Church at Pergamum for its faithfulness to Him. (13)

Despite the fact they live in Satan’s city, He says to the believers in Pergamum, “Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful

witness, who was put to death in your city.” One of their fellow-believers in Christ had given his life because of his faith. Tradition holds that this Antipas was roasted to death in a brazen bull heated to a white heat for refusing to worship the emperor. But the other believers did not renounce their faith. They buried their friend but didn’t bury their faith.

While this commendation by Jesus of the Church at Pergamum is significant, their record is not entirely clean.

Jesus points out two false teachings. (14,15)

The teaching of Balaam and its consequences. We have already told the story of Balaam this morning. Jesus says to the Church at Pergamum, “You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam.” Does this mean that in the Church at Pergamum there was a group who proudly called themselves Balaamites? I doubt it. But there were apparently those in Pergamum who were doing the same thing Balaam did 1500 years earlier in Moses’ day, namely, “He taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.” Whenever believers consider themselves sufficiently secure to toy with false worship, they are playing with fire. The reason is that immoral behavior often goes hand in hand with false religion, especially idol worship.

I feel fairly confident that Balaam didn’t suggest to the Midianite women that they invite the Israelite men over for an orgy. That would have been too obvious, and the men of Israel would never have fallen for it. Instead he suggested that the women invite the men to come and worship with them. “After all, we are all really worshiping the same God. You come and visit my temple this week, and I’ll go to yours next.” Unfortunately, as soon as the men entered the pagan temple they were toast, for they were easily enticed by the sexual perversion commonly practiced there.

Those of you who have served in the military know that success against a well-armed foe is more likely when using a sneak attack rather than a frontal assault. The church at Pergamum had overcome a full frontal assault by Satan in his capital city to the point of even being willing to die for their faith. But their love of liberty tripped them up, leaving them vulnerable to a Satanic sneak attack. They so valued their freedom and were so proud of their tolerance, that they allowed subtle heresies and moral compromise to creep in and create cracks in their armor. They pushed the envelope of liberty over the edge to license.

We must never cross the line between being a friend to worldly people, which we *should* do, and becoming a friend to the world, which we must *avoid*. There is a great difference between a church that reaches out to unbelievers and tries to expose them to the Gospel, and a church that welcomes ungodly people into membership and leadership. There’s a great difference between a church that shows love to gay people and couples living together without benefit of marriage, and one that ordains such people to ministry.

There is a second teaching Jesus rebukes this church for tolerating, namely the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

The teaching of the Nicolaitans and its consequences. If you remember from our study of the Church of Ephesus two weeks ago, this same heresy was mentioned in that letter. We said then that very little is known of the doctrine or practice of the Nicolaitans. The fact that these two heresies are mentioned together indicates to me that they were probably similar. But please note the marked difference in the reaction of the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum to this heresy. Ephesus is commended by Jesus for “hating the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate,” while Pergamum is rebuked for tolerating those who hold to their false teaching.

Jesus promises to use His sword, if they don’t repent. (16)

“Repent therefore!” Jesus commands. “Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” I don’t see Jesus’ promise here to “come soon” as a prediction of the Second Coming, but rather as a promise to visit that particular church in some special judgment. Notice the words carefully. “I will come to *you* and will fight against *them*...” When a church harbors heretics and hypocrites, Jesus Himself promises to root them out, but there will undoubtedly be collateral damage when he does. My prayer is that He never has to use His sword here at First Free.

Jesus promises three rewards, if they overcome. (17)

This is intriguing, because each of these three rewards is relatively obscure in regard to its intent.

Hidden manna. “I will give some of the hidden manna” may be a reference to an ancient tradition regarding the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. You will recall that manna was the supernatural food God provided for the people of Israel during their wilderness wanderings on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land. Some of it was placed in the Ark of the Covenant as a way of remembering God’s gracious provision. When the Solomonic Temple was destroyed in 586 B.C., Jeremiah allegedly rescued the ark with the manna, and it was miraculously preserved until, of course, Indiana Jones re-discovered it (just kidding!). The legend held that at the return of Christ the manna will again become food for God’s people. Perhaps John uses this legend metaphorically to refer to the marriage feast of the Lamb spoken of in Rev. 19.

A white stone is the second reward. A white stone was used in ancient times to signify acquittal by a jury, while a black stone indicated condemnation (that is possibly the origin of the term “black-balled”). White stones were also used as tickets of admission to public festivals. Either idea fits well with the context. The believer is acquitted before God and is admitted to the Jesus heavenly wedding feast where He is the bridegroom and we are the bride!

The third reward is **a new, secret name** written on the white stone. Donald Grey Barnhouse (long-time Pastor at 10th Pres. Church in Philadelphia) suggests a possible meaning of this secret name:

I am called Doctor by those who know me least, Pastor by some who know me more closely. My given name is used by close friends. My children call me Father or Daddy. A mother has called me Son, while in the most intimate of all human

relationships (marriage), there is a place for endearing names which refinement will not permit to be bandied about in public. Not even in letters will these names be used. The actual presence of the loved one is demanded for the use of the names which even the children of the family do not know.^v

This is the kind of intimacy promised to the overcoming believer by the Lord Jesus Christ. The bridegroom will whisper to His bride a tender name that shall not be known to anyone else, even to the angels. When I was a boy we used to sing a song based on this verse, “There’s a new name written down in glory, and it’s mine, oh yes it’s mine.”

Conclusion: Friends, are you guarding your freedom in Christ? Are you guarding it in the sense of not letting legalists steal it from you? But just as importantly, are you guarding it in the sense of not using it as an excuse for indulging yourself, nor making unholy alliances with a pagan world? “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.” (2 Cor. 6:17,18)

The Apostle Paul warns us (2 Cor. 2:11 and Eph. 6:11) to be aware of Satan’s schemes. He is shrewd and powerful, but not very creative. He uses the same tactics over and over. He used the old Balaam trick on ancient Israel and then 1500 years later repeated it in Pergamum. And he will use it again today if we let him, especially if we, like Balaam, look good on the outside but on the inside are living a double life.

If a church doesn’t deal with heresy and immorality in its midst, Christ will. And it won’t be a pretty sight. In fact it may be downright ugly. Jesus has the power of the sword and will use it to keep His bride, His Church, pure for the coming wedding feast in heaven. The “Too Free Church” will be cut down by His mighty sword for permitting the erosion of its moral fiber and integrity. God is calling us instead to be overcomers who are known by our moral integrity and who are looking forward to receiving our invitation to heaven’s wedding feast with our new name engraved on it.

i. Balaam was a real person and not a legendary figure, as evidenced by the discovery in modern Jordan of an ancient Aramaic document whose author is described as “Balaam son of Beor” and is spoken of as a seer of the gods whose specialty was that of a professional imprecator who imposed curses upon others. This material was recovered from a shrine and testifies to the high esteem that Balaam claimed in antiquity (R. K. Harrison, *Numbers*, 293)

2. If that sounds strange it's probably because we live in a culture that's essentially anti-supernatural. Even those of us who believe in God are often guilty of not taking seriously the spiritual reality of angels and demons. The Bible indicates there are demons assigned to nations, and if a sorcerer or fortune teller establishes a link with those spiritual powers, he may

very well be able to put curses on an entire people group.

iii. Even some who have a fairly high view of Scripture try to find something less than a first-class miracle here. For example, one well-known evangelical writes, “As the donkey brayed, she conveyed a message of anger and resentment that the seer understood in his mind in a verbal form” (Harrison, 300). I suppose that would be a possible interpretation if it weren't for what the Apostle Peter wrote in 2 Peter 2:16 about Balaam: “He was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—a beast without speech—who spoke *with a man's voice* and restrained the prophet's madness.”

iv. Nevertheless, Balaam followed with still another prophesy, this one predicting judgment on Balak's Moab and even predicting the eventual coming of Israel's Messiah, Jesus Christ the Son of God. This is not the only time God used a wicked person to deliver a prophesy. In John 11:51,52 the wicked Caiaphas gave a prophesy about Jesus without even intending to do so. Further, Paul describes such false teachers in the church when he writes in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15:

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve.

v. D. G. Barnhouse, *Revelation*, 57.