

Conquering by not Compromising (Revelation 2:12-29)

We continue to look at Jesus's reports on the churches. In these two reports Jesus is pictured as the conquering judge, who promises those who 'conquer' with him a wonderful future. Yet, there is a warning not to compromise with the idolatry of the world.

Winning at Life

On the few occasions we've managed to go on holiday this year, we've often found ourselves driving home on a Saturday afternoon and evening listening to Radio 2.

The show that is on at that time is called Rylan on Saturday and they have a feature called, 'Winning at life', where viewers ring in about some achievement or positive thing about their life, and the presenter Ryan proclaims,
"They are winning at life!"

Now, it's great to celebrate what's going well in people's lives and good to hear lots of positives rather than negatives. Yet, I am often struck with how mundane the things are that are declared to be 'Winning at life':

Typical examples might be:

'We've just completed decorating the toilet' - You're winning at life!

'My football team won the local derby!' - You're winning at life!

'Just been invited to tea at Buckingham Palace' - You're winning at life!

"Just been promoted at work to deputy manager" - You're winning at life!

Do we ever stop to consider what truly 'winning at life' means?

Conquering with Christ

We're looking at what the heavenly Jesus says to 7 churches as recorded in the start of Revelation.

We saw last week, that Jesus is like an inspector, and each time he speaks to a church it is like an inspection report.

Last week we looked at the first two reports to the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna and this week we are looking at the third and fourth reports to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira.

All the reports end with an encouragement to 'the one who is victorious' or 'the one who overcomes' or 'the one who conquers' depending which translation you are using. In a sense they give a true description of what 'winning at life' truly means.

Jesus, the Conqueror - 2:12, 18

But, before we come to the end of each report, let's look at the start of each report. These begin with a description of the inspector, the heavenly Jesus. And in these two letters in particular, the description of Jesus very much emphasises Jesus as the great conqueror:

In the introduction to the report on Pergamum, he is described as the one with the sharp, double-edged and in the introduction to the report on Thyatira he is described as the one whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

Now there are some interesting links with these descriptions and the cities:

Pergamum was the seat of Roman government in the area and the only city under Roman rule allowed to condemn people to death. The symbol for this was of course - a sword. So the implication is that Jesus is the one who more than the Roman authorities is the ultimate judge and the one with the power over life and death. Rome seemed to conquer all before it, but Jesus was the ultimate conqueror.

Thyatira was renowned as a trading town and had a large number of 'guilds' that is organisations that controlled the industry in the town. And what was one of the main industries in the town? Making bronze! It is likely that Jesus's eyes of blazing fire picked up on the blazing furnaces used by the bronze makers and the legs of bronze are also an allusion to the industry. In Thyatira, the guilds seemed to hold economic power, but Jesus was the ultimate judge over the economic activity in the city.

These descriptions of the heavenly Jesus are also picked up at the end of Revelation, where a rider on a white horse comes and defeats the armies that stand opposed to God. He is described as one who has eyes of blazing fire and a sharp, double-edge sword coming out of his mouth and there he is called 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords'. This of course is another picture of Jesus as the ultimate victor at the end of time.

Who is going to win in the end? Jesus Christ, the one who died, but now is alive forever more. He will be victorious over all forces that oppose him and will come as judge of the nations.

To truly win at life in the end means not that the team you support has won a game or even the league, but that you part of Jesus's team that will win eternity.

So, what does this ultimate winning at life look like?

There are many aspects that are shown us in Revelation, but lets look at the two stressed at the end of each letter:

Banquet for the Conquerors - vs. 17

Firstly, at the end of the report to Pergamum, the promise to the conquerors is that they will receive:

- hidden manna
- a white stone

Manna was of course the food that God provided for Israel when they travelled through the wilderness after being rescued from Egypt. The hidden manna here hints at God's great provision of food, in the heavenly banquet at the end of time.

The white stone is a bit more of an obscure reference, but such stones were probably used as invitations to special feasts.

The overall picture seems to be a promise to those who overcome,

that they will be invited to the great banquet at the end of time. Indeed, in the Bible this banquet is often described as a wedding feast.

And at the end of Revelation, there is a wedding. The church, that is the conquerors themselves are the bride! Not only will we be invited to the great banquet at the end of time, but we will be the guest of honour, as the bride of Christ!!

This is truly to be winning at life - far more than an invitation to tea at Buckingham Palace!

Authority for the Conquerors - vs. 26

Secondly, at the end of the letter to Thyatira, is a promise that those who are conquerors, will be given 'authority over the nations'.

This is of course rooted in the idea, that Jesus is the one who will be the ultimate conqueror over the nations, but it is also a promise to those who hold on to Christ until the end, that they also will have authority over the nations.

If you are someone who likes to be in charge or who is fed up with terrible bosses or leaders, then this is an encouragement that one day you will be one of those who have authority, as you follow the perfect leader: Jesus Christ.

You may think that being promoted at work means winning at life, but to follow Jesus means receiving the ultimate promotion!

Compromise, idolatry and sexual immorality

So, we've looked at the start and the end of the letters, but what about all the stuff in the middle. Well there are commendations of what is going well. The church in Pergamum is commended for being faithful in the face of persecution and the church in Thyatira is commended for its love and faith.

Yet, the main thrust is a warning that some in both churches seem to be going down a similar line of compromising with the world that could lead to them losing their place alongside Christ, which might ultimately lead to them losing at life in a big way! It is not too late, there is time to repent and change direction, but they need to act.

Now, compromise can be a good thing. In the Brexit negotiations there will need to be some compromise in order to get a deal, which most agree is a good thing.

But, compromise can be a bad thing, especially if it means abandoning something that really matters.

Pressure to Compromise with Idolatry

For the Christians at this time the pressure to compromise in the sense of abandoning something that really matters was very strong. They lived in cities and cultures dominated by idolatry.

In the report on Pergamum Jesus describes the place as where 'Satan has his throne', this may be a reference to one of the many temples, where the altar to Zeus was shaped like a throne. It may also be a reference to Pergamum as the centre of worship of the Roman emperors in

the area. Indeed, in Pergamum in particular, where the authorities had the power to condemn people to death, one of the Christians, Antipas seems to have actually been killed for his faith - possibly for refusing to sacrifice to the Roman gods.

In Thyatira, where the guilds held so much sway, they were again dominated by idolatry. If you wanted to be part of a guild and so be able to make a living in your trade you may well have been expected to join in with the festivities that would have included worship of idols. To refuse to join in may have led to a serious loss of income.

So, it is no wonder that Christians were tempted to compromise - to join in with the idol worship as a way of avoiding the wrath of the authorities or economic disaster. After all most pagans would have aligned themselves with one particular god, but would have seen nothing wrong with worshipping other gods as well.

Jesus challenges this attitude of compromise - that some were teaching in the churches - with two different allusions to Old Testament stories, where Israel were led to worship idols.

In the report to Pergamum, he refers to the teaching of Balaam, who advised Balak king of the Moabites to lure the Israelites into idolatry, if he wanted them to be cursed by God. This Balak did by having some Moabite women seduce the Israelite men, then encourage them to join them in worshipping the Moabite god. The result was that God sent a plague on Israel until this was stopped.

In the report to Thyatira, he refers to the teaching of Jezebel, who was the wife of Ahab and persuaded him to encourage Israel to worship the god Baal, which again led to God's curse on Israel in the form of a drought until Israel turned from Baal after Elijah intervened.

The point in both stories, is that compromising with idolatry, the worship of other gods led to the people of God coming under God's judgement until they repented. To compromise with idolatry was to lose at life. If the Christians wanted to win at life, they needed to repent.

Idolatry and Sexual Immorality

In both the letter to Pergamum and the letter to Thyatira, the churches are warned against being misled into:

'sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols'.

It is likely that the sexual immorality here is meant to be a way of referring to idolatry. Throughout the Old Testament and at other points in Revelation and the New Testament, idolatry is portrayed as a kind of adultery - the people of God cheating on their exclusive relationship with God, who is in a sense their husband. As we've seen, at the end of Revelation, God's people are portrayed as the bride of Christ. If that is the case then worshipping idols is like cheating on your future husband!

The Bible sees sex as the expression of a permanent committed relationship between a man and a woman - 'the two will become one flesh'. Sexual immorality breaks that oneness. Similarly, the Bible also calls on the people of God to be exclusive in their commitment to the One true God.

Paganism allows the worship of many gods and sexual immorality allows sexual relations with more than one person. Both go against that fundamental expression of commitment and faithfulness to the one other.

To compromise on sexual immorality is to jeopardise your marriage. To compromise on idolatry is to jeopardise your place in the great marriage at the end of time. Such compromise means losing at life, because if they are not repented of they sever our relationships with the person that really matters - Jesus Christ.

Idolatry today

Now we do not live in a society where we worship idols in a religious sense. Yet the issue is not about religion but the allegiance of our heart.

The key question is: "Does the God of the Bible, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have the exclusive allegiance of your heart?"

Does that remain true even when there are pressures to compromise on that, to allow allegiance to other things, like wealth, career, popularity, sexual gratification to have the allegiance of all or part of our life?

Perhaps most challengingly - is it obvious in anyway to those outside the church that your ultimate allegiance is Jesus Christ or are you so compromised with the way the world is that you just blend in?

These are subtle and not easy questions to answer, but if we do not regularly ask ourselves these questions, then there is a real danger that we will so compromise with the world that we will lose our place alongside Christ as conquerors.

Are you winning at life?

Are you winning at life? The only way to truly win at life is to hold firm in commitment to the ultimate conqueror Jesus Christ. That means repenting of all compromise with idolatry.

In him we have the promise that we will be the great bride of Christ at the heavenly wedding banquet and will rule with him over the nations. That is what it truly means to win at life.