

SEVEN – seven letters to seven churches in seven cities. Spoken by Jesus in Revelation to the apostle John. These churches experienced what it was like to be told: *You've got mail, from Jesus*

READ REVELATION 2:12-17

We get our unique depiction of **JESUS** – *the one with the sharp two edged sword*

Hebrews 4:12 - *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it pierces even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

Sometimes it doesn't feel that way. I believe one reason is because we now typically read scripture instead of listen to scripture.

Scott Swain: *“Because Scripture is the supreme locus of God's self-communication in the world, Christians are 'people of the book.’”*

This is true. Of our era.

At times we forget that for centuries books were rare, scripture was rarely printed, few people could read, and for countless generations the Bible was a community event and an act of speaking and many listening. Words weren't shelved in bookstores or libraries, they were spoken ear to ear – and receiving it was an act of listening.

I share this because Pergamum had plenty of books. 200k in their library. It was a bookmark in history, the beginning of a new era of books. One we now live in.

What does it have to do with our relationship with God and His Word? A lot.

Listening and reading aren't the same.

Listening is an interpersonal act, while reading is just me, myself, and I.

In listening the speaker is in charge. In reading the reader is in charge.

When I read a book I look down on it.

But when I'm spoken to or taught I sit under and receive that teaching.

Today's surplus of printed scripture would seemingly lead to cultured minds and maturity, but it often results in consumer minds.

Going to scripture becomes a *quick transaction*, not *living and active*. We look for information in the words, rather than relationship with the one who once spoke the words.

I've heard it said of scripture being living and active:

“It has feet that run after you and hands that lay hold of you.”

Yet most of the Church fails to lay hold of their Bible.

We want God to lay hold of us... but we don't lay hold of His Word.

Again, when reading a book the reader is in charge... and we rarely take charge.

Lifeway did a survey of thousands of church goers a couple years ago and while 90% of believers say they want to honor God in all that they do, only 19% said they read the Bible daily. That lines up with the other recent survey I've quoted to death, that found over 80% of Church goers don't open their Bible outside of the Church. It's just a book on a shelf among other books.

And man don't get me wrong - *there's nothing wrong with a lot of books.*

If you love books you'd love **Pergamum**, as it held the second largest library in the world that had 200,000 volumes. It was second only to Alexandria, Egypt.

With all of its books it quickly became a center of learning known more for culture than commerce. Yet in God's reproach of Pergamum, this place of learning, we see *learning doesn't necessarily result in wisdom.* False doctrine had taken root in the church.

Pergamum, as a part of the Romans empire, had put into practice polytheism and pluralism. They worshipped more than 50 gods and goddesses in the region.

It's no coincidence **the doctrine of Balaam** is referenced. For one Balaam derailed the Israelites in Numbers the same way pagan worship derailed Pergamum here – sexual immorality. But on a deeper level, Balaam is one of those characters in scripture that experienced God in a powerful way but rather than repenting and following God alone, God just got added to a list of lower case gods. His Words got a place on the shelf next to other books. God gets a room in a heart that houses the worship of all kinds of idols.

- How many of us do the same, with or without the realization?
- God gets a place, but alongside other idols and objects we worship.
- And as a result, the enemy gets a foothold.

“Satan's City”

Amidst the more prominent gods in Pergamum, Asclepius was “the god of healing” at the heart of a prominent cult. The chief symbol of their movement was a **snake**. Higher up on the hill, a structure be seen from miles away - the temple of Zeus. Within this sculpture: more snakes.

Satan is revealed as a snake in Genesis and Revelation, and he's active in between. In both he is revealed as a snake, with a forked, split tongue. And his words throughout scripture are split between truth and lies.

Jesus is identified as the one with a sharp **double edged sword**.
Satan takes **one edge** of the sword. **Half truth.**

The more you look at scripture, the more you realize half truths are the enemy's native tongue. I saw someone do a deep study of his words in Genesis 3, the beginning of Job, and the temptation of Christ, weighing what was true and false – 46% true, 48% true, and 46% true.

Satan uses half truths like Trojan horses.

They sound right and we let them in because they're pulled from what God's said.

Genesis 3 we see a serpent and a half truth.

God had told Adam, *You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*

But the enemy quotes Him as if he were a killjoy, as if it weren't a prohibition of one tree, but of them all... *Has God said, You shall not eat of every tree?*

Then Eve gets careless with the words of God, either due to miscommunication by Adam or her own distortion: *"you must not touch it or you will die."*

"Don't eat" – God's actual command, becomes - *"Don't touch."*

She distorts God's Words, and what was meant as a caring command ultimately derailed Adam and herself.

How often do our missteps in life come from similar misconceptions?

How many of our headaches are caused by half truths?

In **Matthew 4** Satan comes to Jesus like he did to Eve.

He quotes God. He tempts Jesus three times with three verses out of context.

What does Jesus do? Jesus replies to each with more scripture. *Here's the context.*

Jesus' correction for the Church in Pergamum is that they allowed false doctrine to go unaddressed. False doctrine had made its way into the Body of Christ and had taken root.

2 Corinthians 11:3

I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted, just as Eve was deceived by the cunning ways of the serpent.

Why? See verse 4:

You happily put up with whatever anyone tells you...

What does this look like in our modern context?

Copy and Paste Christians. People that march to the beat of their own drum made up of belief that are a mashup of Bible related quotations, blogs, and sermon clips. We parrot our faith with bits and pieces we've picked up here and there.

Far too many people read Bible verses but not their Bible.

Amidst the people who plain don't pick up the Bible,

Less than 30% of all Christians will read the Bible from cover to cover.

Less than 30% of all Christians will read ALL of scripture.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

ALL Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

All scripture is useful for, as it says in the NIV- teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training.

Bits and pieces often give us comfort without correcting and reassurance without the rebuke.

The result: we end up less than thoroughly prepared and equipped!

The goal? Equipped for ministry.
Where is the ministry done? The world.

The Church in Pergamum wasn't called to ministry contained within its four walls any more than we are. They were called to be a light and minister to a dark culture. We're called to take God's grace and truth to our Pergamum.

We see this walked out in POWERFUL ways in scripture.
Daniel. Joseph. Jeremiah's advice to seek the good of the land they were exiled.
These churches in Revelation suffering persecution amidst pagan cultures but still being a light.

But Pergamum was slipping in their witness.

Because when we aren't fully dedicated to truth of God's Word, the double edged sword...
We don't transform anything. We conform.

The problem is evident in a **double-sided coin** from Pergamum in the Constantine era after this letter was penned. One side has Christian emblems. The other has emblems of pagan gods.

You can reach out without selling out.

The cost of love and grace isn't truth.
Grace and truth aren't opposites, they are two sides of the same double-edged sword.

It's not that we don't *know* the truth. But we don't *like* the truth because it cuts.
We don't like that part of the verse: *makes us realize what is wrong with our lives?*
Don't confront me, affirm me.

But we like the version of Christianity that does away with whole "deny myself,"
and affirms what I'm already inclined to do."
We want a sponge that is soft.
We want a roller that massages.
We want a Q-tip that details.
But it's a double edged sword full of truth that cuts.

In a recent survey, 6 in 10 Americans agree that "*religious belief is a matter of personal opinion and not about objective truth.*" The real kicker- in the church? 1 in 3 said the same.

We've become a people that look down on scripture to analyze it. Because we read it.
Again... printed Bibles we own become objects we control when we forget it's the living and active Word of God spoken to us.

The De-Conversion Story. Stories of deconstruction. The starting block of these stories is an awakening that involves questioning what one has long believed in the Church. With this awakening comes the assertion that certainty is inconsistent with the way religion works.

Those who have a deep conviction about the truth of our beliefs need to realize need to repent, humble ourselves and be open to questioning our interpretation of the Bible. But this quickly goes off the rails... if we're required to be uncertain in our interpretations of the Bible, then what doctrines can really be affirmed? All becomes uncertain — including the divinity of Jesus, his resurrection from the dead, the forgiveness of our sins.

Now- most aren't willing to abandon the certainty of these basic truths. But that just reveals a selective commitment to questioning. The appeal to uncertainty is often used to justify one's own new, untraditional beliefs. Ultimately - *one's own truth*.

The result? We no longer exist to seek and serve God.
God exists to give permission to do whatever we want.

Is there deconstruction to be done? Absolutely, that was the heart of the Reformation. Radical deconstruction. Good discernment often leads to deconstruction.

But at the same time we are called to rightly divide what? ***The word of TRUTH.***
Not my truth. Not your truth. Not something we stand over. *A truth we stand under and obey.*

In our culture we can get so caught up deconstructing and re-constructing “your truth” and “my truth” we let go of rightly dividing the Word of truth.

What's ironic when you look at Hebrews 4, containing the verse we opened with, God's word being a pillow, or a sponge, or a Q tip would make more sense. The content of the chapter is peace, rest, more rest, and more peace.... *and then shockingly we get this image of God's word as a sword that strips us, cuts us, and leaves us bare on a surgeon's table!*

This is the Gospel. Oh there's *good* news! Jesus saves. Grace and mercy covers.
But there's bad news. You're not sick in sin, you're dead in sin. You need radical life change.
We want the rest, the comfort and the peace of Hebrew 4.
But we don't want to go under the knife to find healing first.
Like surgery, it can hurt before it heals.
It doesn't just step on toes, it cuts right to the heart.
It exposes what we would rather cover up or repress. Secret desires and selfish ambition.
It can be *painful*. There's few words to better describe it.

But leave it to **Charles Spurgeon** to make a run at it:

“The Bible has wrestled with me, it has smitten me. It has comforted me. It has Smiled upon me. It has frowned at me. It has warned me. It weeps with me. It sings to me. It whispers to me. It rebukes me. It reproves me. It is the living word of God.”

As we finish hearing the letter to Pergamum, we aren't left in this letter with questions like:
How? Where do I sign up? Where do I find this surgeon?

Jesus doubles down when he says in verse: ***“Repent of your sin, or I will come to you suddenly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”***

How do we wage war with sin? How do we fight our failings?
God's Word. The Bible.

Where do we find saving faith? Romans says it is by *hearing the word of God*.
The weapon to fight the slow drift of compromise is the WORD of God.
What you apply to walk in truth is the WORD of God.
Feel dry or drifting? Simply **come back to the WORD**.

Not for transaction. For relationship. Not as a consumer. As a son and daughter.

The cure for what ails you is found in picking up God's Word and responding in relationship.
The cure for whatever you see ailing the church is the word of God.
It's why he tells these churches, all of them reading this: *Anyone with ears to hear must listen*.

Again – this was a phrase Jesus used again and again during his earthly ministry that he's still using in his resurrected glory. If you've got ears to hear, hear! This word used for hear is *akouō*
And built into this word for hear is a response. There's no separate word for response.
Hear and heed. Receive and respond.

But speaking of pet phrases, do you know what question Jesus asks more than any other?
"Have you never read?"

If he walked among the aisles of the American church asking the same question, too many would answer yes. The Word of God isn't living and active in many of our lives. It's dead and dusty.

We don't just pick up and read our Bible.
We hear and heed. We are called to akouo.
What does this mean?

Read with expectation for application.

Because if hear had a built in response, our reading should carry the same expectation.
Read prayerfully. Read thoughtfully. Read carefully and critically.
But don't get so caught up in chasing the obscure that you miss the obvious.
First - God wants relationship with us.
And second - for all God's mystery there is also clarity that is relevant to our day to day reality.

PROMISES - Manna – another type in scripture of the Word of God, our daily bread.
And it is a type of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

It's not one of the other, but both and.

The Bible isn't daily self help for us to critically apply.
The Bible is about Jesus, and helps us center our lives in Him.

Second way to read scripture: **Ask God to reveal himself every time you read the Bible.**

Augustine put it this way: *"When the Bible speaks. God speaks."*

The Bible says in 1 Samuel 3:21 that *"[God] revealed himself to Samuel through His Word."* – pray that for yourself.

But in Numbers, the Manna the Israelites ate daily before the Promised Land was a type of the spiritual food provided by God. This side of Heaven, God's Word serves us in the same way.

When God provided manna, it wasn't boxed and amazon primed to each Israelite's tent. Individuals had to go and gather the manna daily outside of the Sabbath. Each individual – in Pergamum or here and now – is dependent on God's Word, and we are responsible for our individual supply.

Jesus says in John 5:39 – *“Here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want.”*

If our Bibles, this living and active revelation of Jesus, could talk, it would echo the same words *“You aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want.”*

In the same way, if Jesus asked the American Church “have you not read?” the chorus in reply would be an unfortunate “no.”

Verses without context and bits and parts of the truth can't become our daily bread. Because Satan still uses the same weapons - half truths. Our defense? Finish it for him. Give him the full truth.

Maybe the Enemy comes at you with the reality of Romans 7, we've been doing what we don't want and failing to do what we DO want...

I feel this angst and shame all too often.

But then I fire back the truths Paul writes in Romans 8

Vs. 1 – there's no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

Vs. 37 – we are more than conquerors through him who loves us.

Vs. 39 – nothing can separate us from his love.

Don't speak half-truths over yourself that cause heartache.

This – the Bible - is a gift.

There are believers all around the world- either in poverty or the persecuted church- who would give anything to hold one of these.

And yet if we aren't careful we can become consumers instead of mature believers.

Because we possess this, but God doesn't possess us.

Reading is a transaction, instead of relationship with the one who spoke life into existence.

Let us be hearers who akouo the Word – again and again, day by day, as we follow Jesus.