THIS CALLS FOR PATIENT ENDURANCE

Revelation 13:1–14:20

Key Verse: 14:12

“This calls for patient endurance on the part of the people of God who keep his commands and remain faithful to Jesus.”

 Today’s passage is mainly about worship. Many people would say they don’t worship—they’re not religious. That sure looks true in many neighborhoods on Sunday mornings where so few people actually go to church. But worship isn’t just a religious thing. It’s not just about going to church, singing songs, hearing a sermon and giving an offering. Worship is about our hearts in daily living. Know it or not, each human being is engaged in some kind of worship, every single day. Whatever or whoever we’re giving our hearts to the most, whatever or whoever we’re sacrificing for the most—that’s what or who we’re really worshipping. And in this world, every day a battle for worship is going on. There are so many pulls and pushes to worship this or that person or thing, especially in our increasingly secular and pluralistic society. According to one social commentator, people today are obsessed with four things: the media, celebrity, technology and drugs. We wouldn’t ordinarily call such obsessions “worship,” but basically, it is. In our culture there seem to be endless options for worship, all seemingly legitimate.

 But today’s passage tells us that really, there are only two ultimate options for our worship. We can be worshipping either “the beast” and his image, or the Lamb. One is based on deception; the other, on truth. And it’s really a serious matter who we choose to worship—it’s actually a matter of our eternal destiny. In this study we want to think about what kinds of compromises to our Christian worship we’re being tempted with today, and how we can renew and maintain a genuine worship of Jesus. We want to think about one essential ingredient of this worship—the willingness to die, to give our very lives, for it. May God speak to us through his living words today.

 In last week’s passage we saw that we’re living in a spiritual battlefield between God and Satan, and that we can experience victory in this battle only through the blood of Jesus. In this week’s passage we see how Satan actually wages war against God’s people. It’s through two “beasts,” one from the sea and one from the earth. Maybe it means there’s no hiding place! There’s actually three figures here in chapter 13: the dragon (13:1a), the first beast (13:1b) and the second beast (13:11). The dragon and the first beast look very much alike (13:1b; compare with 12:3), and the second beast tries to get people to worship the first beast (13:12,14). Actually, it’s a parody of the Holy Trinity. The dragon is Satan, who wants to take the place of God the Father. The first beast is the Antichrist, who has a pseudo “death and resurrection” story like Jesus (13:3,12b,14b). The second beast tries to mimic the work of the Holy Spirit, who draws glory to Jesus (Jn16:14), by drawing people to worship to the first beast.

This unholy trinity is fundamentally deceptive. What are the main elements of the deception? First of all, the beast looks so powerful. When he comes up out of the sea, he’s got ten horns and seven heads (1b), which is basically stressing his great power. Also, he looks like a cross between a leopard, a bear and a lion (2a)—all very powerful and scary. The dragon gives the beast his power, throne and great authority (2b). People are so impressed with the dragon and beast because of their power and authority. These images are taken from the prophecy of Daniel 7. Many scholars think this first beast represents the power of godless human governments, beginning with the Babylonian, then the Assyrian, Greek and Roman Empires, and extending to all powerful human governments until today, especially those that are anti-Christian. Human beings are still so easily drawn to power and authority. Why? Because great power and authority seem to give security. But in the case of the dragon and the beast, the power and authority are deceptive. Why? Because actually, they’re both *given* their power and authority by God. And God eventually strips them all of their power and authority. Only God has real power and authority, even though he doesn’t flaunt it or force people to respect it.

The other part of the deception is the blasphemies. Each of the seven heads of the beast has a blasphemous name on it (1b). Moreover, this beast utters proud words and blasphemies. It blasphemes God, his name, his dwelling place and his people (5,6). Many think these blasphemies represent the cult of emperor worship rampant in the Roman Empire. In the vision, so many people are drawn to this blasphemous creature. Why? Because in every generation, fallen people always like proud, rebellious words. People are swayed by those who talk big, who act like they can talk down anybody, who can verbally rip anybody to shreds, whose verbal philosophy is: “nothing is sacred.” This too, is deceptive, because it seems like the beast can get away with all these blasphemies. His blasphemies make it seem that God isn’t real, that he has no power to vindicate himself, that his holiness is all just a joke. But God *is* real, he *does* have the power to vindicate himself, and his holiness is no joke.

The most gruesome part about the first beast is what it’s allowed to do. Look at verse 7. It’s given power to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them. Here, to “conquer” is literally to kill them. Revelation tells us that many of God’s precious, holy people who remained faithful to Jesus were literally killed—they shed their blood for their faith. It’s been happening ever since the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. Christian bloodshed in whatever form it may take is always disturbing. It makes it look like Satan is winning, like the gospel isn’t true after all. When Christians are publicly silenced and defeated, people all around the world are won over to Satan’s side. More and more start abandoning the faith and worshiping him. It makes the world look dark.

In such a world, what should we do? Read verses 9,10. This is a quote from the prophecy of Jeremiah. In that prophecy God was telling his people that it was his will for them to go into Babylonian captivity. In the same way, God is telling believers here, facing a terrifying beast trying to kill them, that sometimes, it’s his will for us to lose, even to die. Instead of losing heart about it, we need patient endurance and faithfulness to God, even though we may suffer great humiliation or even death. To patiently endure and be faithful requires faith. This is one of the main themes of the whole book of Revelation: don’t give up, and don’t give in! Be faithful to God, even to the point of death (2:10b).

If this wasn’t all, the author goes on to describe the second beast. Look at verse 11. He’s deceptive, too, because he looks like a lamb but he speaks like a dragon—meaning he’s a liar (Jn8:44,45). Later he’s called “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). Many believe he represents all false prophets in history who lead God’s people astray. Jesus warned about false prophets (Mt24:24). Paul says false prophets masquerade as angels of light (2Co11:4,13–15). This second beast, the false prophet, is a master of deception, because he performs great signs and miracles to get people to worship the first beast; he even calls down fire from heaven (13:13). He gets people to set up an image of the first beast, then makes it look like that image can breathe and talk (13:15a). And though he seems to be trying to persuade people through great signs and miracles, in the end he just *forces* people to worship the first beast, threatening that if they don’t, they’ll be killed, or at least, they won’t be able to buy or sell anything (13:15b–17). They’re forced to worship the beast through their pocketbooks. In the same way, Christians today are tempted to compromise.

Simply speaking, this second beast can represent social pressure. In every generation there’s intense social pressure to compromise our faith by worshiping something or someone other than God. In our society, the temptation is subtle but very real. Many people say, “You gotta have money!” And they tempt people to put money-making as their first priority. The Bible says people “wander from the faith” in order to pursue money (1Ti6:10). Some become slaves of the stock market, thinking they’ll get so much money to maintain their luxurious lifestyle. Some become slaves of real estate investments. People also say, “You gotta put your kids first!” And they tempt people to make their children their idols. Their whole lives revolve around their kids—which seems good in some ways. But it’s not good when God isn’t really in the picture. Many are living vicariously through their kids. Some literally worship their hobbies, such as music, cooking or travel. Some are even worshipping their dog or cat. Many worship themselves, their appearance, through endless hours in a gym, in front of a mirror, or with a plastic surgeon. People who have no money or material things to show off, who don’t focus on their family or hobbies or pets, who ignore themselves but give their whole hearts to Jesus, seem like weirdoes or fools. Social isolation and ridicule are more powerful influences on us than many of us would like to admit.

In verses 16,17 we see that people let themselves receive the mark of the beast. It’s represented by the number 666. This is one of the most famous passages in Revelation. Some take it literally, that at the end of the world there’ll be a most deceptive antichrist who’ll rule the world and force people to have these numbers stamped on their hands or foreheads. But numbers in Revelation are symbolic, as are images. This symbolic number, 666, it says, is “the number of a man.” What does it mean? Many have thought it’s the number of a specific human being who’s the antichrist. They take the words “Let the person who has insight calculate the number” to mean to figure out whose name it is—whether Nero or Hitler or some other scary figure. But it doesn’t mean to be a cryptic math genius; it means to have spiritual insight. The spiritual insight is to see what most people in this world are getting sucked into: secular humanism.

What is secular humanism? It’s to focus life on human beings rather than on God. To the Jews, human beings are represented by the number 6, and God, the number 7. 6 is really good, but it’s imperfect, always one *less* than 7. Here, the number 666 represents all three of the unholy trinity: the dragon, the first beast and the second beast. All three of them seem so great, but all three are always less than perfect. All three represent the deception of focusing on human beings instead of on God—in fact, focusing on people and leaving God out. Human beings can be amazing and really good. But no matter how good, all people fall short of God’s glory (Ro3:23a). It’s tempting to worship seemingly good people rather than God. But it’s always deceptive. To be marked by the number of the beast, 666, doesn’t mean to get tattooed, but to have our minds, hearts and lifestyles shaped by secular humanism, to become focused on self or other people instead of on God. How much our culture lures us, in so many subtle ways, to worship ourselves rather than God!

Then John sees another, contrasting vision. Look at 14:1a. “Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion…” The images of the dragon and the first beast and second beast are so vivid and powerful, they seem to steal all the thunder and get all the attention. But here we see the image of the Lamb. Many think Revelation is about the antichrist. But actually, the Lamb is the main figure. We first see him in chapter 5. He looks as if he’s been slain, but he’s standing at the center of God’s throne in heaven. Everyone there is focused on him, on worshiping him and praising him. 5:12 says, “In a loud voice they were saying: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!’” In chapter 7 there’s a great multitude in heaven who’ve come from every nation on earth, and they’re all worshiping the Lamb. They’ve washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (7:14; cf. 22:14; 1Jn1:7–9). He’s their Shepherd who leads them to springs of living water and wipes every tear from their eyes (7:17). In chapter 12, they are those who triumph over Satan “by the blood of the Lamb” (12:11b) Earlier in today’s passage, in 13:8, it’s the Lamb who owns the book of life, and the Lamb was the one who was slain from the creation of the world. In chapter 17, the Lamb is called Lord of lords and King of kings. In chapter 19, heaven is described as “the wedding supper of the Lamb.” In chapter 21, the church is called “the bride of the Lamb,” and in heaven, the Lamb is the temple and the Lamb is the light. Finally, in chapter 22, in the new heaven and new earth, there is “the throne of God and of the Lamb.” Here, the Lamb is standing on Mount Zion. This vision symbolizes God’s salvation in heaven. The Lamb is the one with the real power. The Lamb is the one who wins the real victory. The Lamb is the only one worthy of worship.

In verse 1b we also see the 144,000. We first saw them back in 7:4; now they’re here again. Note how they’re described. In contrast to those with the mark of the beast, these people have the Lamb’s name and his Father’s name on their foreheads (1b). Their minds and hearts are steeped not in the world, but in the knowledge of God. They’re the only ones who can sing the new song, not because they’re super talented singers, but because they’ve been redeemed from the earth, so they personally appreciate the song’s meaning (2,3). Read verses 4,5. Here’s where it gets controversial. Some have thought these people are super saints who never got married. But people who get married are never defiled or less spiritual than virgins, and virgins are never more spiritual than married people. In fact, these 144,000 aren’t a literal number of a super elite group. They’re symbolic of the perfect, complete number of all God’s people in history: 12 times 12 times 1,000. Standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion, they share his victory (1). Their being virgins is symbolic of their being pure and holy. They could never be pure and holy with mere human virginity; they’re *made* pure and holy by the blood of the Lamb. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes (4). They’re loyal and obedient to him like soldiers, ready to serve him and fight for him, even at the risk of their lives. They’re the most precious firstfruits of the heavenly kingdom to come (4b). While following the Lamb, they’ve become just like him; they’re not deceptive at all; they’re truthful and blameless like him (5).

In the second section of chapter 14 John sees three angels. The first one has an important message for the whole world. Read verse 7. No human being anywhere in the world should ever worship any other created thing or person. We each should be worshiping our Creator God who made us all. The second angel declares the fall of Babylon the Great (8; cf. Isa21:9; Jer51:7,8,64). It’s symbolic of the fall of all world systems, governments and cultures with all their wealth, power and glory. They fall because they’re humanistic and leave God out, and they’re tempting people to go astray from God. The third angel warns people not to worship the beast and its image or receive its mark; if they do, they’ll suffer eternal punishment (9–11). Why? It’s because God wants us to remember his grace, worship him, and be loyal and thankful to him. To turn away from God and his amazing grace is the worst betrayal there is.

Read verse 12. This verse repeats 13:10b and summarizes the lessons in this passage. Living in a world of great beasts in powerful positions, with proud blasphemies and pressure to compromise our worship, what we all need is patient endurance. We need to keep God’s commands—especially, to worship him in spirit and in truth and to remain faithful to Jesus. How can we remain faithful to Jesus in this dark world? We need to remember that he’s the Lamb who’ll stand on Mount Zion. He’s the victor. He’s the only one worthy of the worship of our hearts. We need to always remember he was slain for our sins to redeem us out of this world and make us pure and holy. We need to rely on his precious shed blood for our sins, not on our own efforts. We need the help of the Holy Spirit to remain faithful to Jesus and to love him with all our hearts.

In light of this passage, let’s examine our own hearts and see what or who we’re really worshiping. Sometimes its actually ourselves. This passage calls us to repent and renew a personal love for Jesus the Lamb. We need to love and worship him not just on Sunday mornings, but all day, each and every day. This passage also calls us to repent of our fear of suffering. We often compromise faith in Jesus because we don’t want to struggle or suffer too much. But our Lord Jesus gave his life for us, and he calls us to give our lives for him. As we learned in last week’s passage, we should not love our lives so much as to shrink from death (12:11b). Read verse 13. We can’t take money or fame with us from this life. But the things we do out of love for Jesus will follow us to eternity.

In the last part John describes his vision of the final judgment (14–20). Jesus will separate the faithful from the unfaithful like a farmer harvesting his crops. It will be a time of great joy for those who suffered for his name’s sake. The image of grapes of wrath crushed in the winepress with a huge amount of red blood is a symbol of the horror that will happen to all those who blasphemed God and his salvation in Jesus.

May God help us all to really worship the Lamb. May he give us patient endurance and enable us to be faithful to Jesus in this world where Satan rules for now.