

Sermon
“The Two Beasts”
Discipleship For Today, Part
Revelation 13

Introduction Before the Sermon

The book of Revelation helps give us a new vision of reality – or perhaps better – an expanded vision of reality ... through the use of vivid images that touch our creative side so as to help us better “see” the truth of the gospel. I might not be able to grasp what it means for God to be sovereign, but it helps to be shown a throne in heaven, with God sitting on it. I might not get what it means for God to offer himself as a sacrifice for my sin, but it helps to be shown a Lion who is also a slain lamb.

Last week had our vision expanded by seeing Jesus’ coming at Christmas pictured as resulting in a cosmic war ... between God’s forces of good and Satan’s forces of evil – a war which was won because of what Jesus did – sacrificing Himself as the Lamb of God. Because of Christmas, a cosmic war has been won!

So why the ongoing suffering in the world and among God’s people in particular? Why was John and the church going through such persecution? Because, as we saw in chapters 6-11 in the opening of the seven seals and the blowing of the seven trumpets, God in His mercy has delayed His final judgment as an act of

mercy – to allow people time to turn back to God and find the salvation Jesus came to bring. In the meantime – the in-between time – between Jesus’ first coming and second coming – the devil (pictured as an formidable dragon) is furious because he knows he has been defeated ... and so goes after God’s people. And starting last week our texts helps us see the devil’s strategy so we can know better how to “overcome” as God is calling us to. With this in mind, let’s listen to the Word of the Lord.

Read Revelation 13

Introduction

Today we see two beasts – one who rises from the sea, and a second who rises from the earth – who, together with the dragon of chapter 12, form an evil threesome – a kind of counterfeit trinity – with each mimicking their holy counterparts – God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The description of the dragon in Revelation 12 mimics the description of God the Father in Revelation 4. The description of the sea beast who (13:3) “*seemed to have a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed*” mimics the description of Jesus the slain Lamb of God in Revelation 5. The earth beast in his work of pointing people to the sea beast mimics the work of the Holy Spirit in Revelation 11.

Who are these two beasts? First, let's talk about who they are not. You are no doubt aware that some of the images of this chapter are some of the most speculatively interpreted of any in the Scripture. There are all kinds of wild ideas this chapter – for instance, many have used the images here to identify specific people as the anti-Christ ... with all of the following earning that distinction: Adolf Hitler, Bill Gates, Ronald Reagan, and Barney the Dinosaur!¹

And it is not just Bible teachers – but popular culture as well! The images in this chapter have been part of some big movies, such as *The Omen* and *Rosemary's Baby*, as well as countless B movies – all of which contributes to confusion about this chapter.

So being thoughtful theologians in regards to this text is important. So who are these beasts? Let's start with the sea beast. Now, were John's readers expecting to someday see a seven-headed ten-horned dragon literally rising up from the sea? Of course not – they would have understood it as a symbol.

And so the question is, “a symbol of what?” Let's answer that question by looking carefully at how the text describes the beast,

¹ <http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/barackobama/a/obamaantichrist.htm>, accessed 6/19/10.

and then identify the beast by looking at how John might have identified it in his time. Note first that this sea beast is ***empowered by the devil***. The devil is pictured as watching on the shore of the sea as this beast comes out of the sea (an image of chaos and evil in ancient times), and that the dragon (vs 2) “*gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority.*”

And what is this beast’s mission? To oppose God and to ***work against God’s desires*** (vs. 6): “*He opened his mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live heaven.*” Here we see the devil’s real agenda. He hates God. He wants to destroy God. And since he can’t, He wants to hurt Him by hurting the crown of his creation – humanity itself. And so he uses the sea beast to speak blasphemy – denying God and His truth – in order to lure people away from God. And even more, by making the sea beast to be a God-substitute and luring people to worship the beast because of the beast’s power: (vs. 7): “*men worshiped the dragon ... and they also worshiped the beast and asked, ‘Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?’*”

This beast is not only working against God, but also ***attacks God’s people*** (vs. 13:7): “*He was given power to make war against the*

saints and to conquer them.” If the beast can’t get to God, he’ll hurt who he can – those who love Him.

Now the final thing about the identity of this sea beast. In Daniel 7 we read a parallel story to our text – a story John and his readers would have been very familiar with – about four beasts very similar to the beast John describes: the first is like a lion, the second like a bear, the third like a leopard, and the fourth indescribable. And in Daniel we are told specifically (Dan. 7:17) that these four beasts represent “*four kingdoms that will rise from the earth*” – nations which rejected God (likely the historical kingdoms of Babylon, Persia, Mede, and Greece) and had become bestial because of it

With these in mind – the beast as a nation which had rejected God, was empowered by Satan, powerfully working against God’s desires, and brutally attacking God’s people – who would John and the church of his day thought of? The specter of Roman Empire of the day. Rome was the mighty power that no one could stand up to. Rome controlled its people through fear of repercussions. Rome demanded that people worship the emperor. And it was because of Rome that John was exiled on the island prison of Patmos. It was because of Rome that untold thousands of

Christians were harassed, losing status, property, employment, and for literally tens of thousands, even their very lives.

And so the beast is Rome. But it is also more than Rome. For in every age, there are governments that lose their way and become bestial. Perhaps this is why in Revelation unlike in Daniel, there is only one beast – which points to this: Revelation’s *sea beast* is the sum total of all godless empires – the archetype of the anti-God state – or perhaps more simply, it is a picture of *political power gone astray* – devoid of God.

It is a warning that governments can lose their way, become enthralled with their own power, and in doing so can become anti-God and a hindrance to Christian discipleship. And we see this manifest not only in the oppression in the Roman Empire, but throughout history ... in Nazi Germany, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, and South Africa’s apartheid – just to name a few. And lest we become too proud, our own country has plenty of examples of political power gone astray and opposing God’s desires for people – the Jim Crow laws of the segregated south, or more personally, the relocation on the west coast of Japanese Americans during WWII that led to my family and extended family’s imprisonment.

Now of course, in the Scripture what we find is that government – has a legitimate place in human culture. We can't function without it. We need a way to govern ourselves. It is how God made us. It is why in the Scripture a call to respect the governmental authorities that are over us ... to (2 Pet. 2:17) “honor the king,” because governmental authority is a God instituted reality.

But it can lose its way. Not because all states start as bestial. It's just that power exercised apart from God always moves toward trying to play God. That's what happened to Rome. While there were some good things about the Roman Empire, as its power increased, the state started demanding first a nationalistic commitment, and then eventually emperor worship – culminating with Domitian's order to be addressed as “Lord and God” – and the horrific slaughter of those who refused to bow to his image.

Which brings me to the second beast – the beast which rises from the earth. Who is this earth beast symbolic of? Like the first, this beast is allied against God – in fact, what we see is that this *earth* specifically *beast calls people away from* worshipping God – and instead to worshipping the first beast ... (vs. 13:12): “*He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast* – which is why in later

chapters of Revelation (16:19 for instance) he is called a “false-prophet.”

Notice next that *this earth beast has the appearance of spirituality* ... he appears religious (vs, 13:13): “... *he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven*” – all in order to get people to worship the sea beast. This beast claims divine authority for his purposes – saying a divine authority – and showing it by spectacular accomplishments ... manipulating people – deceiving people – through religious trickery – into worshipping that which is not the true Living God.

And he will stop at nothing to get what he wants – even *using* coercive *power to force conformity* – such as (vs. 17) preventing people “*from buying or selling*” unless they had received a mark on their forehead or hand which showed they belonged to the beast – and even killing (vs. 15) those who refused.

Again, for John, the imagery here would have been unmistakable – he would have seen Rome in all of this – but here with a particular emphasis. For what is the earth beast’s focus? Religion! What we see is that just as political power can go astray and become a hindrance to Christian discipleship, so can *religion can go astray*.

As in Rome's emperor worship and its call to compromise and its complicity in the horrors of persecution. But not just with Rome. For in Revelation we hear of warnings not just about false prophets from outside the church but also warnings about those from inside the church! In Jesus' message to the churches in Ephesus and Pergamum and Thyatira we read of false apostles inside the church – with the common denominator in them all being a call to compromise with the culture's idolatrous institutions!

Now this compromise in our text is tied to the infamous “mark of the beast.” which is the “*name of the beast or the number of his name*” – given as “666.” As you know, this image has led to all kinds of imaginative interpretations – such as the speculation of an 18 digit identification number implanted in one's skin in a microchip. But what would have come to the mind of the first century reader, to whom this was written? Something we have talked about already in chapter 7 ... the mark put on a slave to show to whom the slave belonged.

This mark is said to be a name or a number. Now as I said in an earlier sermon, a “name” in Scripture is a reference to one's character – thus to bear someone's name on your forehead or hand

would have been a way saying that you reminded someone of that person – in the way you think and speak, and in the way you act. Thus to bear the name of Jesus' on our foreheads (as we saw in chapter 7) is to have Jesus show in our lives. And by contrast, bearing the name of the beast is not the implanting of a microchip in one's skin, but showing through your character and actions your allegiance to the beast.

Now the beast's name is also identified with a number – the infamous “666.” Now there are a number of ways this has been interpreted. One is to use a practice of the time called “gematria” which is the process of assigning a number to a name based the sum of the values given to each letter in the name. It would be like, A=1 B=2 etc. up to J=10, then K=11, etc. Archeologists have found a sentence in a cave that reads, “I love her whose number is 545” – like carving one's initials in a tree, I guess. I love her whose number is 212 (“Beth” in gematria) Now using gematria, it is possible to come up with the number 666 for the full name of Emperor Nero. However, truth be told, this demands some maneuvering to get the numbers right.

It has also been observed that 666 is one short of the perfect number 7. The best the devil can do is 6 – three times – the trinity

but incomplete. This approach sees the number as not giving a name, but a description of the beast's character – incomplete. It is simply a way of symbolizing the total incompleteness – failure upon failure – of the dragon, the sea beast, and the earth beast.

Now putting all these together, let me get to some ways we can apply this to our lives today. First, ***we are reminded as God's people of the danger of over-trusting politics***. Here is a call to hold our allegiances to political institutions lightly – seriously, yes, but lightly. We need to be wary of being lured into complicity with the sea beast. Yes, we are willing to get involved in the political world – we vote, we work for what we think good. But at the same time we recognize that it is the nature of political institutions to move away from God and toward worshipping themselves, and how easily we can be sucked into misguided allegiances. I read recently about a preacher who declared from the pulpit, “America is the world's last great hope.” Now I am a proud American – I was screaming when the USA tied their game in the World Cup game. I believe that we have much to offer the world – in fact, I believe America is a great nation. But America is not the last great hope of the world – as Psalm 118:9 reminds us: *“It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.”*

And so because of this (and this is third on your outline), *we are reminded as God's people* that while we might be citizens of a country on earth, that we are more importantly *citizens in* of the trans-national *Kingdom of God*. That while we have a loyalty to our country, it is a limited loyalty. In fact, we have more in common with brothers and sister in Christ in China or Lebanon or in Afghanistan than we do with another person in the US who doesn't follow Christ – because we are both declaring our uncompromising allegiance to the President of presidents, the Emperor of emperors – the King of Kings and Lord of Lords ... Jesus.

So that when, like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we find ourselves at odds with the state, we politely refuse to compromise, and do instead what God desires – and then face the consequences. Like them, we say,

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us ... O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know ... that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Dan. 3:7)

Third (second on your outline), we are reminded of the *danger of religion* – that religion can become an agent of the dragon. And the danger is not just from just emperor worship in the first century

and other anti-Christian groups who seek to dissuade others from the faith throughout history. For we Christians throughout history have also succumbed to the danger ourselves ... with things like the Crusades and witch hunts – and in doing so have not done service to the Kingdom, but harm.

And so because of this, we are reminded of this ... that in the battle against the dragon and the beasts, that our call is to overcome by *following the way of the Lamb* – by heeding the call to (vs. 10) “*patient endurance and faithfulness.*” Not by striking back in retaliation. Not by forcing people to conform. That’s the way of the dragon and the beasts. Our call is to live differently. Not to overcome evil by mimicking evil. But by pointing people to Jesus, and living in such a way that they see the reality of His love and grace in our lives. By living faithfully – sacrificially – absorbing in our lives – and even our deaths – suffering and hurt and sin. That’s how Jesus lived. That’s how we are called to live.

May God empower us to live that way. Let’s pray.