

The Mark Of The Beast

On Sunday, Alex Pittaway invited us to explore the meaning of the infamous “mark of the beast” as described in Revelation 13.

1. Warm-up question: Alex began his sermon by telling how, as a teenager, he was obsessed with – and scared of – the book of Revelation. How do you see the book of Revelation? If it could come alive as a person, what would that person be like, and look like, in your opinion?
2. Alex indicated that the book of Revelation was likely written about 40 years after the time of Christ, during the reign of Roman Emperor Nero. Sometimes the Roman Empire is depicted in laudatory terms. Rome built roads, infrastructure, aqueducts, great cities, pioneered modern governance, and established law and order. But it’s also true that Rome was a deeply unequal society of haves and have nots. The empire was built through violence and enslavement. In fact, two-thirds of all people within the empire were slaves. On top of that, the Emperor was believed to himself be a “Son of God” worthy of worship. Those who refused to worship the Emperor as deity could be jailed, enslaved, or worse.
 - a. Worshiping the Emperor meant fitting in; it meant you were part of the system. It also meant you embraced the values represented by the Emperor. Based on the foregoing summary and what you know about the history of the Roman Empire, what were the highest values of the Roman emperors?
 - b. Then along came Jesus. He said he came to bring “good news to the poor” and to “set the captives free” (Luke 4). He taught that each human being is equal and has infinite value in the eyes of God. He said the highest values are love, mutuality, respect, and caring. His followers called him “the Son of God,” the same title claimed by the Roman Emperor. His followers spread out across the Empire telling everyone that the Romans tried to crucify Jesus, but God raised him up to life again. Basically, Christians were teaching that it was time for the “Kingdom of God” to replace the kingdoms of this world. How do you think the Roman authorities felt about this message? How do you think this message resonated with the two-thirds of Roman society that were slaves?
 - c. John, the author of the book of Revelation, had been arrested by the Romans and imprisoned on a barren island. Why do you suppose the Romans wanted to silence him? How do you suppose John felt about Rome?
3. Read Revelation 13:11-18. Here John uses symbolic language to describe a titanic struggle between Jesus and the values of his kingdom versus the Roman Emperor and the values of his empire. The second beast described by John is a negative mirror image of Jesus. The beast looked like a lamb, but had horns (the power of violence) and spoke like a dragon (angry threats). John offered his readers a coded message that would help them identify this beast. The number of his name was 666. Alex explained how each letter of the Hebrew alphabet had a corresponding number.

When you spell out Nero's name and title in Hebrew – Noron Qosor – and total the corresponding numbers, they equal 666 exactly. Alex said that, in John's vision, "The mark of the beast is supposed to mirror the mark of baptism. In the mind's eye of [John], both marks are invisible," yet made evident to everyone around us by our manner of life. We either live the values of the Kingdom of God or the values of the kingdoms of this world (as reflected in Nero Caesar).

- a. Over time, there have been many different theories as to the identity of the beast John describes. What theories have you heard? How does the theory Alex shared – that Nero (and what he stands for) was/is the beast – sit with you? Do you find this theory persuasive?
 - b. What do you think of the idea that the mark of the beast is not an actual physical mark, but rather a spiritual mark on the soul evidenced by our manner of life?
4. Alex defined an idol as anything that promises to give us what only God really can. Worshiping the idol of Nero Caesar was believed to bring all kinds of good things – security, destruction of your enemies, wellness, love, and access to the economic system and prosperity. Alex challenged us to consider what idols might be most likely to tempt us today to betray the mark of our baptism (and the values of Jesus) and embrace the ways of this world (and its values), thereby cheapening our existence. He offered several examples:
- a. Have you ever been tempted to compromise your faith in order to win or keep the love of a spouse or significant other? Or to seek self-worth through the love of another, rather than the love of God? How did that work out?
 - b. Have you ever been tempted to place a higher value on the acquisition of wealth than building a deep spiritual life? How did that work out?
 - c. Have you ever valued social acceptance more than standing with Jesus? What happened?
 - d. Alex gave a couple examples of how we, like the ancient Romans, can get so caught up in the culture and values of the nation state where we live that we become apathetic about the injustices and prejudices of that culture, rather than struggling to reform them. He cited two examples that he feels deeply: lack of concern for the plight of immigrants and lack of concern about gun violence. How should the values of Jesus affect our response to those two areas?
 - e. Throughout his sermon, Alex kept coming back to this overarching question: What are you accepting in your life from the values of the world that cheapens your existence? How would you answer that question?
 - f. As people observe your life, what mark do you think they see – the mark of Christ or the mark of the beast?