

Revelation 13 tells us about two great beasts that Satan uses in his war against the Church. We heard about the first beast last week, and we saw how it was a symbol of human authorities and human governments that fight against God and against his Church. But now in this part of Revelation 13, we hear about the second beast and more about the first as well. Because the second beast serves the first and tries to compel all the world to worship it.

So John tells us, beginning in verse 11: "Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon." This beast is quite a bit different from the first one, but its appearance shows us what this beast is. It has two horns like a lamb, because it wants us to think that it is a lamb. In other words, it wants us to think that it is Jesus. Because you'll remember in Revelation chapter 5, Jesus is presented as a lamb, although he has seven horns instead of only two. But this beast wants us to think that it is Jesus, or at least that it speaks for Jesus. But when it speaks it speaks like a dragon. This beast may look like Jesus, but it speaks like Satan. Because this beast comes to deceive, to lead people away from the living God. This is why later in the book of Revelation this beast is called the false prophet, beginning in a chapter like Revelation 16. It is a symbol of all kinds of false religion.

Now, it is that, first of all, because it is true of false religion generally, of all false religions, of all those which lead away from God. In John's time, that would've been Roman religion: full of idolatry, full of all kinds of evil things. And it's not like you could get away from it either. Roman religion was everywhere. If you went to the government, if you went to the marketplace, if you went to the theater, it would still be there. They thought that religion, their religion, was what held their society together. They thought that's what kept them safe, and so everyone had to participate in it.

But we have to remember this beast looks like Jesus, or at least he wants us to think that it looks like Jesus. And so it is also a symbol of all those who claim to be Christian and yet teach lies in the name of God. Sometimes they do that by teaching Christians to compromise, saying that it's okay to go along with the world, that it's okay to do what everyone else is doing. We saw all kinds of examples of this in the first part of the book of Revelation, in the letters, people who were saying that it was okay to participate in Roman idolatry. And because of that, many people fell into sin and were led astray. But we see this also with people who say things that the Bible never said or who teach things that God never wanted to be taught. People who say that God hates the things that he actually loves, or that God loves the things that he actually hates. Paul puts it very well in 2 Timothy 4 when he says: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."

Christians, unfortunately this is true also of our own day, because we see entire church bodies which teach lies in the name of God. Entire denominations who say that what is evil is actually good. Entire church bodies who say that we don't have to really listen to the Bible, that it's out of date, that some parts of it really no longer apply. Church bodies which uphold everything that the world says, that you wouldn't be able to tell the difference between them and the world. Their pastors may look like lambs, but they speak like dragons, because the second beast is still very much at work in our world today.

But we have to remember that the second beast serves the first one. It wants to lead people to worship the first beast, to treat it as if it was a god. And it deceives people by doing all that it can, even performing great signs, calling down fire from heaven the way that Elijah did. It all seems very legitimate. It all seems very true. For example, you have people who will speak the way that the Bible will speak, use the words that the Bible uses, and yet mean very different things by it. Twisting it so that they can say what the Bible says, but mean something entirely different. And if we're not paying attention when that happens, we can very easily be led astray.

But this second beast is not above using force to get people to go along with it, either. The first thing that we see it doing is setting up an image of the first beast for people to fall down and to worship. Now, if we want to understand this image, we need to see two things from the Old Testament, the first one being the book of Daniel and the image of Nebuchadnezzar. Because in Daniel chapter 3, Nebuchadnezzar sets up a great golden image on the plains of Dura, and he commands his entire empire to come and to worship that image. And if they don't, he says, again, Daniel 3: "Whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace." Nebuchadnezzar uses the threat of death to get people to go along with his idolatry. And so it is also here in Revelation, Christians. The second beast compels people to worship the first as if society depended on it, as if this was the only thing that was holding it all together. In John's day that included statues of the emperors, which were in their marketplaces, which were in their temples, and which they sacrificed to, which they treated as idols.

But it doesn't have to be just physical things. It doesn't have to be a physical idols. Ideas can also be idols. And these ideas can be said to be the things that are holding us together, that you have to believe these things so that we can get along, so that everything will be better. And if you don't go along with these things, if you don't believe what the world believes, if you don't go along with the world's ideas, then you'll be second class citizens in your own country. If you don't accept these things, they say you're being a bigot. You're a domestic terrorist. You are a threat to our democracy! You are the reason we are having all these troubles. So go along with it or face the consequences!

And the second thing that we need to see from the Old Testament here is what we heard in our Psalm, that idols are often presented as if they were only things, as if they were only made out of wood or stone or gold and so forth. Psalm 115, for example, says: "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see," and so forth. The Bible often presents idolatry as foolish because idols are just things. They can't do anything. Only God can do something. Only God can actually help you. Only God is the true living God. That's how idols are most often presented in the Bible.

But here, it's a little bit different, because this idol, this image can speak! The second beast gives breath to it so that it is able to speak. It seems as if this image has power. It seems as if this image can do great things. It seems as if this image is God. It's still a deception. Don't get me wrong. It is still not real, but it is a strong delusion, and many people follow after the first beast because of it. And we see this also today, Christians. The ideas that the world holds up are often presented as if they are something that is impossible to fight against, that you have to go along with them, that you have no other choice. Be on the right side of history, people will say. Follow along. Don't go backward. Don't try to turn back the clock. Our way is inevitable. This is the way that it's going

to go, and you can't stop it. If you refuse to get on board, you're going to be left behind. So fall down and worship like the rest of the world!

And the beast also tries to compel people by giving it the mark of the beast. I think the best way to understand this mark is to see it as the opposite of the seal of God. Because if you remember in Revelation chapter 7, God seals the 144,000 on the foreheads with the mark of the living God. He seals them with the promised Holy Spirit to show that they belong to him, that they are his out of the world. And it's the same way with the mark of the beast. The mark shows who belongs to the beast. We should not think of this mark as something physical, as something that you can see, just like the mark of God is not something that we can see either. But rather the mark shows your loyalties. It's like asking, where does your allegiance lie? Do you follow after God, or do you follow after the beast? Which one do you follow?

And if you don't have the mark of the beast, Christians, if your loyalties are not with the world, then we'll probably have a very difficult life indeed, cut off from the rest of society. In John's time Christians very often had a hard time finding work because they refused to go along with these things. They were even persecuted because they didn't want to participate in this idolatry. But it's also true for us today. Christians are harassed by the world simply because they are Christians, because they dared to speak the truth of God's Word. You even have Christians who are doxed, who have their private information made public through the Internet so that now they start receiving death threats and having people attack them, finding out where they live, making their life extremely miserable simply because they are Christians. There are Christians who have had their lives ruined in that way. And even on the other side of things, you can hardly go to the stores without finding something that doesn't support these things in one way or another. Either because the business itself is trying to promote evil by selling things that promote these things, or they give money to causes which promote these things. It's hard to be able to buy anything these days that doesn't promote these things in one way or another. And all of this is done in an effort to get us to go along. Fall down and worship like the rest of the world!

But that, of course, leads us to the last verse of this chapter, arguably the most difficult one. Verse 18 says: "This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666." Now, this is difficult, and honestly, it's not entirely clear what John means by this. But there are two basic main ways in which to understand this. The first way is to see it as a kind of code for a name. Because if you were to take a name, for example, and assign a number to each letter within the name and add them all up, then you would get the number of the name. So if A was 1, for example, and B was 2, and so forth, you get all the numbers, add them together, there you have the name in number form. This was actually a very common thing to do in those days. There was an inscription in Pompeii, for example, which said: "I love her whose name is 545." It was a very common way of dealing with these things. But if that's what John was doing, then he wants to point us toward something specific. I think that most often the most reasonable way of looking at that is to say he was referring to one of the emperors or to one or more of the emperors and to warn us against going along with them in that way. Now, that would make a lot of sense, because emperors were worshiped as gods. They were the head of Roman society. They were kind of the symbol, the figurehead of the entire thing.

But ultimately Christians, I don't really like that approach. For one thing, it's pretty ambiguous. Because you can really make a name, any name fit the number if you try hard enough. In fact, you'll see that sometimes out in the world, people who will say that they have discovered what 666 refers to, anything from Adolf Hitler to Ronald Reagan. There's no limit to how many names you can make this fit if you try hard enough, and so I don't really like it because it's ambiguous for that reason.

Rather, the other way to understand this, the way that I prefer, is to see it as a symbolic number like so many of the other numbers in the book of Revelation. Seven is a perfect number. It is complete. So six is imperfect. It is incomplete. So six, then, would show how the beast cannot measure up. No matter how hard he tries, he never is equal to God. He never measures up to God. No matter how many people worship him, he will always be imperfect. And three sixes together show that he will always fail, that everything that he does is imperfect. If three tens, for example, make a thousand, and a thousand means everything, so it is also with 666. It shows his complete imperfection. Think of God as being 777, and then maybe it will make a little bit more sense. But no matter what the beast does, he never measures up. He will never be equal to God. He is always 666.

But either way, no matter how you want to understand it, the point that John wants to make is the same. We must not compromise with the world. Because following the beast in any way is turning away from God. We must not take the mark of the beast by giving into the world, by going along with these things. We must remain faithful to God. In John's time, that meant refusing to worship the emperor. It meant refusing to go along with Roman idolatry. That made their lives harder, yes, but they did it because they belonged to God. And in our own day, Christians, we must also refuse the mark by staying loyal to God. We must speak the truth of God's Word. We must call sin a sin, even if all the rest of the world says otherwise. We must not give in on whatever it is that the world is doing. We must not go along with these things. Because we bear a different mark: the seal of the living God on our foreheads, the promised Holy Spirit given to us through the Word and through the Sacraments. Because we bear that seal, Christians, because we bear God's mark, we do not belong to the world. And for that reason, let us follow after God in everything without compromise, because we are his forever!

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, who has sealed us with the promised Holy Spirit and who has called us out of the world to yourself, help us to stand firm without wavering against all the pressures of this world, so that we may remain faithful to you through all things; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.