

“His Number is 666”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 20

Texts: Revelation 13:11-18; Daniel 8:15-26

There is no subject—with the possible exception of the unpardonable sin—which has caused as much consternation for the people of God as has the so-called “mark of the beast.” John pointedly warns his hearers against taking such a mark on the back of the hand or the forehead. He also tells us that anyone who takes such a mark swears allegiance to the beast. This has given Christians throughout the ages a healthy suspicion of any government which persecutes the church or hinders the preaching of the gospel. It has led to a number of questions in our own day about advancing technology and increasing government control over many areas of our personal lives. Such a warning from an apostle creates a climate in which sensational predictions and warnings about political events and technology are the norm. So we must do our best to bring clarity to this most difficult and controversial of subjects.

In past sermons, we have been working our way through Revelation 12-14 in which John introduces his reader to seven of the main characters in the great drama of redemption. Like the seal judgments of Revelation 6-8:1 and the trumpet judgments of Revelation 8-11, the vision recorded in Revelation 12-14 describes the entire period of time between the first advent and the second coming of Christ from a distinct theological perspective (or “camera” angle as we have been calling it). In this section of Revelation, John gives us a vivid description of the struggle between the people of God and our great adversary, Satan, who has been cast down from heaven to earth where he now seeks to wage war upon the church of Jesus Christ through the agency of his henchmen, the beast and the false prophet.

Recall that in Revelation 12, John introduced the first two of these seven characters, the woman and the dragon. The woman, as we have seen, is the Israel of God. Bearing a crown of twelve stars upon her head (symbolic of the 12 tribes of Israel), the woman gives birth to the Messiah and is subsequently protected by God from the wrath of the dragon who seeks to sweep her away with a torrent of lies. But God protects the woman from the Devil’s attacks. And so frustrated on two occasions, the dragon leaves the woman in the wilderness where God is protecting her and now seeks to make war on her children, those whom John describes in Revelation 12:17 as people, “*who obey the commandments and hold to the teachings of Jesus.*” John is, of course, referring to the church.

Another major character in the story is the dragon, who is identified as Satan. Depicted in Revelation 12 as a hideous creature with seven heads, seven crowns and ten horns, the dragon has the power to sweep a third of the stars from the sky. This symbolic imagery harkens us back to Daniel 8 and the prophet’s vision of a huge pagan empire which waged war on the saints and covered with world with lies. Using apocalyptic symbolism, John describes how the birth of the Messiah brings about a war in heaven in which the dragon suffers a great defeat and is cast down to earth. Satan can no longer enter God’s presence and make false accusations against the saints. Having lost all access to the throne of God, Satan is completely enraged. Unable to overcome the woman directly, the Devil seeks the agency of another to continue his on-going war against the church of Jesus Christ. And this brings us to the third character introduced in Revelation 12-14 by John, the beast. If Satan cannot overcome the woman and her children with a torrent lies, he will do it at the point of the sword of a willing government.

As we saw last time in Revelation 13, the beast which rises up from the sea is empowered by the dragon to do his bidding. And like the dragon, the beast has ten horns and seven crowns, closely identifying him

with a world-wide empire which will arise repeatedly throughout the course of the present age, bent on persecuting the church. The key to interpreting this apocalyptic symbolism correctly is both the Old Testament and the historical situation in which John is writing to the seven churches of Asia Minor.

When viewed from the perspective of the Old Testament, John is describing the fourth beast of Daniel 7, in which the prophet foretells of a huge god-hating Gentile empire which arises at the dawn of the messianic age. Daniel's fourth beast is symbolic of an empire much greater than all the others and which makes arrogant and boastful claims against God, all the while waging war upon the people of God and attempting to deceive the nations with its lies. When viewed from the perspective of the audience to whom John is writing in the first century, the beast of which Daniel had foretold some six centuries earlier, is now a present reality in the form of the Roman empire, which has been empowered by Satan to persecute those who hold to the testimony of Jesus Christ. Recall that in the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3, we read of Christians who were prevented from buying and selling in several of the churches to whom John is writing. A number of Christians in these churches have already laid down their lives as martyrs, remaining faithful to Jesus unto death and then taking their places before the glassy sea with the great multitude of the redeemed. Therefore, when John sees a beast coming up out of the sea, the apostle is speaking of the Roman Empire which was even then persecuting Christ's church.

But the activities of this beast are not limited to the Roman Empire, nor to John's day and age in the first century. In fact, this Satanically empowered beast will rise again and again throughout the course of this age only to be thwarted by God, after a brief period of time during which the beast is allowed to persecute the church. We see the beast in recent past with Hitler's Third Reich and in Stalin's Socialist Republic. We see it in the present with the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan and in the People's Republic of China, and in the corrupt Islamic nations of sub-Saharan Africa and the Arabian peninsula.

For the beast is not subtle nor is he hard to identify—he wages war upon the saints, and as John says, “*he was given power . . . to conquer them.*” But the beast's victory is only a fleeting one. All those whom he kills are raised by Jesus Christ and come to life, joining that glorious and triumphant church in heaven. Therefore, even though it may look like the beast is triumphant, he is actually being defeated. For the martyrs overcome the dragon through the blood of the Lamb.

But this beast from the sea apparently suffers a fatal wound to one of its seven heads, but when the wound is miraculously healed, John says “*the whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast and asked, ‘Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?’*” This is a reference to a counterfeit resurrection which prompts men to worship the dragon as he allies himself with the beast, and must be seen against the backdrop of the so-called “Nero myth,” and the mortal wound to the Roman empire, from which it was miraculously healed.

Nero Caesar was perhaps the most notorious of all of Rome's emperors. Nero was a vain man and a thief. He killed his pregnant wife and blamed Christians for a fire in AD 64 which destroyed much of the city of Rome. He then used this as a pretense for beginning a reign of terror upon the church. By all accounts, Nero was evil personified and a ruler under whose reign Rome went from being a pagan empire which was largely indifferent to Christianity, to an empire which was overtly hostile to Christianity and whose emperors would be increasingly regarded as deities. When Nero committed suicide in AD 68, at thirty years of age, rumors quickly spread that Nero had either gone into hiding and would soon return to seek revenge upon his enemies, or that Nero, would be raised from the dead.

Nero becomes an important object lesson for Christians in all ages. If we wish to identify the beast in our

own age, we look to the Roman empire under Nero. But the resurrection of the beast has a wider application beyond that of the rumors associated with Nero's death. Nero bankrupted the Roman treasury and left the empire in shambles. Much of the city of Rome had burned and was not rebuilt. There was rampant crime and civil disobedience. Military victories were few and far between and the great Roman empire had suffered what appeared to be a mortal blow. And yet, through the succession of emperors who followed after Nero, including Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, Rome not only regained her former glory, she exceeded it. Order was restored, the army achieved a number of victories, and the economy flourished.

Indeed, from all appearances it looked as though the Roman empire had suffered a serious set-back under Nero, only to recover and then achieve greater heights under his successors. Not only did the beast achieve a resurrection of sorts, but it was during this period that emperor worship began to flourish. This is what John is getting at when he says, men began to worship the dragon and that the whole world was astonished by Rome's recovery and expansion. Who can make war against the Roman Empire? The answer in those days was, "no one!" When an empire such as Rome survives an apparently mortal wound, and comes back stronger than ever, the beast appears invincible and men and woman gladly pay it homage. And there is one coming on the scene whose sole purpose is to make sure that this happens.

This, then, is a brief recap of the ground we covered last time, and which brings us to our text this time, the latter half of Revelation 13. It is here that John introduces the final member of the counterfeit Trinity and the fourth main character of this section, the so-called "false prophet."

What John sees in verses 11-18 is very closely connected to the first beast which rises out of the sea. Says John, "*then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon.*" There are a number of very important points in this short declaration. The first is that this particular beast is called the false prophet in Revelation 16:13, while here it is depicted as a messianic pretender coming out of the earth. Second, since the first beast came up out of the sea and this beast comes up out of the land, together, it would seem that their influence extends to all the earth (land and sea), in an attempt to mimic the kingdom of God and attract worship to the dragon whom they serve.¹

Furthermore, John describes this beast as having two horns like a lamb, but speaking like a dragon. This two horned-lamb is clearly an imitator of the seven-horned lamb who was slain in Revelation 5:6. He is therefore, a false messiah who is closely allied to the first beast. His two horns mimic the two witnesses, the two lampstands and the two olive trees of Revelation 11.² As a false messiah, he promulgates false worship, or worship which is directed to someone or something other than God. Whereas the ministry of a true prophet is to lead people to worship God, the false prophet's mission is to entice people to worship the beast, which is the state.³ Together with the dragon, the beast and the false prophet form a false Trinity, placing themselves in positions of power and authority so as to deceive the world and receive the worship of the earth's people, which is rightly directed only unto God.

Based upon the prophecy in Daniel 8 of a secular empire—this lamb speaks with the full authority of the

¹ Poythress, The Returning King, 145.

² Beale, Revelation, 707.

³ Beale, Revelation, 707.

Dragon, who is Satan. When he opens his mouth on behalf of the first beast, he speaks nothing but lies. He is not only a false messiah, he is a master of religious deception. Like the figure depicted in Daniel chapter 8:25, this false prophet *“will cause deceit to prosper, and he will consider himself superior. When they feel secure, he will destroy many and take his stand against the Prince of princes. Yet he will be destroyed, but not by human power.”* According to Daniel he exercises his power during a time of great upheaval, described in Daniel 8:23-24. *“In the latter part of their reign, when rebels have become completely wicked, a stern-faced king, a master of intrigue, will arise. He will become very strong, but not by his own power. He will cause astounding devastation and will succeed in whatever he does. He will destroy the mighty men and the holy people.”* While Daniel spoke of this as coming to pass in the distant future, it is a present reality for John and the Christians to whom he is writing in the first century.

This second beast has been variously associated by Christians with the Roman emperor cult, the Roman Catholic church, and a myriad of false teachers throughout the history of the church.⁴ There is a measure of truth in each of these associations. Indeed, there is much in the New Testament warning us of false teachers who will come and try and lead the saints away from their savior. Recall that in Matthew 24:5, Jesus himself warned us of false messiahs who would arise within the church. In his first epistle, John warns us, *“Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us”* (2:18-19). According to John in verse 7 of his second epistle, *“many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.”*

But the second beast of Revelation 13 is not just any false messiah—he is a false messiah with a very specific purpose. It is his purpose to deceive people into worshiping the state. He will use any means he can. He is, as we will see, a Satanic propagandist par excellence.⁵ Indeed, John makes a direct connection between this second beast—the false prophet—and the first beast, which is Rome. In verse 2, John tells us that the false prophet, *“exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed.”* This connection between the false prophet and the Roman empire is very important because it means that the second beast is the imperial emperor cult (emperor worship), which included priests who devoted themselves to the emperor, but also extended to a number of pagan cults which regarded the Roman emperors as deities. This also extended to the so-called “Commune of Asia,” which was a council of various representatives from cities throughout Asia Minor, where emperor worship was promoted in exchange for favors from the Roman government.⁶

You know the story—a delegation comes to Rome from some out-lying city, tells the emperor that a temple has been built in their city so that he might be properly worshiped, and then the committee goes home with the promise of funding for a new road or a new aqueduct. While the political *quid pro quo* is certainly part of the equation, we must not overlook the fact that local authorities not only encouraged emperor worship and built temples and shrines to practice it, but worship of the emperor in many places

⁴ G. K. Beale, Revelation, 707.

⁵ Poythress, The Returning King, 143.

⁶ Poythress, The Returning King, 143.

became the law of the land.

The historical context for this reference to the false prophet, then, is clearly to those individuals in John's day who promoted the worship of the Roman state and its emperors. We have already seen how pervasive this was in the letters to the seven churches in those cities in Asia Minor where emperor worship was central to community life, such as in Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum. In many cases, Christians were prevented from buying and selling. Many more were killed by the beast. There were also the local trade guilds which frequently devoted themselves to a pagan deity seeking that deity's blessing upon the guild. These guilds also encouraged and supported emperor worship since it was necessary to conduct business. Unless a Christian tradesman was willing to ally himself with such a guild, and acknowledge the pagan deity or the deity of the emperor, he may not have gotten work.

We have also seen references made by John in the seven letters to the Jezebels and certain false teachers in these churches who hold to the teaching of Balaam, as well as to certain others, who were telling Christians that they could serve two masters simultaneously, Jesus and Caesar. These are false prophets who seek to entice Christian people to worship serve the Beast. All of this is in view when John speaks of a second beast, a false messiah who comes up out of the earth and who does the first's beast bidding.

But what about the false prophet's miraculous powers? In Revelation 11, when we discussed the two witnesses who were slain by the beast, we saw that the church was given power to bring destructive plagues upon the earth like Moses. The church was given power as to shut up the heavens and bring fire down upon the earth, like Elijah. These powers mirror the first four seal and trumpet judgments. Even as Satan gave Pharaoh's magicians powers to perform signs matching that of Moses, the dragon gives such power to the second beast. According to verse 13, "*And [the false prophet] performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men.*" This should come as no surprise to the church. Jesus himself told the disciples: "*For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible.*"

Are these genuine miracles, or Satanic deceptions and chicanery? Although they are probably the latter, John does tell us in verses 14 and 15 that these Satanic signs and wonders have great effect. "*Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.*" As recounted in Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar had ordered the three men into the furnace for refusing to worship a golden image, so too the false prophet is given the power to take the lives of those who will not worship the beast or the dragon who empowers him. Mimicking God's prophets and the lamb who was slain, all three characters of this counterfeit Trinity—the dragon, the beast and the false prophet now take their place in the great drama. They are the arch-enemies of Jesus Christ and his kingdom, and seek, through any means possible, to deceive the world so that men worship the dragon. Those who will not bow before them, will forfeit their very lives. But their work was foretold by Daniel, and was already a present reality when John was given this vision to record and disseminate to the churches. This is the background for verses 16-18, when John speaks of the so-called mark of the beast and reveals to the churches the beast's secret number, which is 666.

According to John, the False Prophet "*forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name.*" Despite the insistence of our dispensationalist friends that this is a reference to a future technology (probably computer generated or

an imbedded microchip or some other technological gizmo) supposedly placed upon people by the Antichrist during the seven-year tribulation, the fact of the matter is that there is no seven-year tribulation. John calls the entire period of time between Christ's two comings the great tribulation. Christians in John's original audience *already* faced this very threat. John is warning all Christians in every age to be on guard for the state to impose its mark upon us when it forces us to declare that someone other than Jesus is Lord. To take this mark is to worship the beast, which is to worship the dragon who lies behind him.

John has already made it clear in Revelation 7 that the 144,000 (the church upon the earth) are sealed with the name of Christ, protected from God's wrath, though subject to persecution by the beast. John has also told us in Revelation 13:8 that all those whose names are not written in the Book of Life worship the beast. Therefore, the mark of the beast is a first century phenomena, probably an allusion to the practice in John's day of the tattooing of slaves, soldiers and devotees of various religions, indicating that they are owned by or solely devoted to another. Such a mark may even be a reference to the emperor's image, which was on coins, contracts and official documents. The mark of the beast, taken on the back of the hand or the forehead is an apocalyptic symbol for the "states' stamp of approval," given only to those who go along with the religious demands being made by the state. Those who comply can buy and sell and conduct normal commerce. Those who do not, cannot buy and sell.⁷ This was already going in some of the churches to whom John is writing. Christians were forced to choose—Christ or Caesar?

But what about the number 666? In verse 18, John says "*this calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number. His number is 666.*" Throughout the history of the church there has been much speculation about what this number means. I am not going to use what time remains to go through the history of this. But I think we already have the solution in view. John's call for wisdom likely entails Christians looking to the Old Testament background, and then attempting to understand, how, in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, these things were being fulfilled before their very eyes. Soon after Revelation was written, Christians figured out that this was a kind of ancient code, a gematria, since letters in many ancient languages were also assigned a numeric value. When the Greek words "dragon" and "beast" are given such numeric value in Hebrew, both total "666." When done with *Neron Kaisar* (Greek for Nero Caesar) the total is 666. This fits perfectly with John's assertion that 666 is the number of a man, and connects Nero to those who empower him, the Beast and the Dragon.⁸ But while Nero may very well be in view, the thrice repeated "6's" also tell us something important as well—they point beyond Nero to the beast in every age!

John has been making the point that the dragon, the beast and the false prophet constitute a counterfeit Trinity, seeking the worship of the nations, rightfully meant for God and his Christ. The number 7 is the number of perfection and completeness, hence the divine number would be 777. But "6" is the number of man, and repeated 3 times, "666" consistently falls short of 777. Therefore, the number 666 is an apocalyptic symbol for those rulers, nations and false teachers, whose Satanic nature becomes apparent to the people of God.⁹ Nero may have been the first whose number was 666, but he will not be the last.

⁷ Beale, Revelation, 715.

⁸ Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 192-193.

⁹ Beale, Revelation, 726.

This has nothing to do with bar codes, debit cards, microchips and modern technology—although all of things may be enlisted by the false prophet in service to the Beast. The mark of the beast and the number 666 has to do with the beast and false prophet forcing people to acknowledge that the state and its ruler are divine. The mark was present when someone in John's day confessed "Caesar is Lord" and worshiped his image in some symbolic way so as to buy and sell. The mark of the beast is seen in news reels when German school children sing "Hitler is our savior, Hitler is our Lord." It is not a phenomena limited to a future tribulation. The mark of the beast and the number "666" is the tell-tail sign of our enemy Satan and his two henchman, the beast (the state) and the false prophet (the beast's spokesman).

Beloved, we are the people of God. We need not fear the dragon, the beast or the false prophet. We need not fear their mark. For we are sealed with the name of God and of his Christ in our baptism. Our hope is not to escape from our enemies through a secret rapture, but as our baptismal liturgy puts it, we are to manfully fight against and overcome sin, the Devil and his whole dominion. And our weapon against the beast and the false prophet is the truth of God's word—the law and gospel—which exposes all Satanic deception and reminds the world that "666" is but the number of a man. And what can men do to the church of Jesus Christ? If they kill us, we come to life. If we live, we preach the gospel. Either way, we have nothing to fear. As John has already made clear—we have already overcome the Devil through the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, no messianic pretender, no false prophet, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord! Amen!