

“THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM.”

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Scripture Texts: Revelation 2:12-17

Introduction

This evening we turn to the third letter Jesus told John to write, the letter to the church in Pergamum.

Pergamum or Pergamos is 55 miles north-east from Smyrna in western Turkey. The city is built on a large high hill, hundreds of feet high with a commanding view of all the surrounding valley. For centuries it was a royal city for kings, before and during the Greeks.

In 133 BC the Romans made Pergamum the official capital of the province of Asia and the seat of imperial authority. As such Pergamum was the first official center of emperor worship. The first and for a long time only temple of Emperor worship was built here in honor of Caesar Augustus. A second temple was built in honor of Emperor Trajan and later a third to honor Severus.

In Pergamum government was god, government was savior and to it was owed loyalty, allegiance, homage.

Emperor worship required an oath and an offering to the divine emperor. To refuse to bow down and say “Caesar is Lord” was treason, meaning death as a traitor and an enemy of the state.

Other gods worshiped there included Zeus, Athena (daughter of Zeus, goddess of wisdom and victory) and Dionysus (god of fertility and wine).

Aesculapius, the god of healing, was worshipped with the symbol of a serpent, which is still seen today in the medical symbol of a caduceus, a serpent wrapped around a pole. A kind of alternative medicine, today it would be new age.

Because Pergamum was the center for Roman politics and the Roman cult of Emperor worship and the worship of other gods, Jesus called it the throne of Satan. Satan was powerfully present in this city of rampant idolatry.

This was a very difficult place to be a Christian.

Christ’s Character Identified with the Church, 2:12.

Christ identifies Himself with Pergamum in a specific and important way.

Christ was addressing Christians in the seat of authority, the official capital of the province, the place where Rome exercised rule. The sharp, double-edged sword is the symbol of Christ's absolute and universal authority and power over life and death.

If you lived in a center for pagan worship what help and hope would you need? For serious spiritual warfare what weapon do you need most? This aspect of the character of Christ was what the Christians in Pergamum needed most.

Everyone knew Rome wielded the sword of authority and judgment. But Jesus will use the sword of judgment to strike down the idolatry of Rome.

Revelation 19:15 From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron.

The sword is the sword of truth for those who repent and believe, and it is the sword of punishment for those who don't believe and refuse to repent (Romans 13:4).

Christ's Commendation, 2:13, and Condemnation, 2:14-15.

Every letter has an acknowledgement that Christ knows His church. "I know you, I know where you are, I know what you are going through, I know what you are thinking and believing. I know you." Jesus has intimate knowledge of His church. It's His church; He is attentive to every detail.

And He knows each of us and our hearts. He knows the names of whose faithful and who is faithless. He knows the name of the man who was martyred under Emperor Domitian, Antipas.

Commendation

The Christians in Pergamum lived in a very hostile environment, politically, socially, and spiritually. Opposition came from all sides. The suffering and persecution that Jesus warned the church in *Smyrna* about had already come to Pergamum.

Jesus expresses their plight in the strongest terms. He knows they are in the pit of hell. Wicked influences surround them. Satan himself is opposing the church.

Yet they were persevering and remaining loyal to Christ even in the face of death.

Consider how hard it was to continue in the faith under the threat of death when the threat had been carried out against one of your own church members.

When a person facing death denies Jesus, what does that say? It says they think life here and now is better than Jesus.

When a person facing death doesn't deny Jesus, what does that say? It says they think Jesus is better than life.

Psalm 63:3-4 Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you.
4 So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands.

Jesus is jealous for His glory and His reputation and they are upholding His name, they are not bringing shame on the name and glory of Jesus.

Condemnation

Some of the members of the church in Pergamum were compromising with the culture of the day and saw no harm in attending idol feasts and keeping company (associating) with temple prostitutes.

Doctrinal and moral laxity was creeping into the church through the teaching of the Nicolaitians which was just a new version of the old Balaam error.

Balaam was the OT prophet who God would not allow to prophecy anything negative against Israel so he advised Balak, the king of Moab on how to conquer Israel by enticing her people to compromise so they would bring the judgment of God down on themselves.

Numbers 25:1-3 While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. 2 These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 3 So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

Numbers 31:16 Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the Lord.

The Nicolaitians drew God's people into sexual immorality and idolatrous feasts (vv. 14–15). They lowered moral standards and encouraged others to do the same. Their presence was toxic, their practices were unholy, contrary to all the teaching of God's Word.

When you are under constant stress from persecution, when you are suffering so much because of your faith, it is easy to fall prey to temptations, to some small sins as pressure relief valves.

They may have been looking for some sort of peaceful co-existence with Rome and the culture. Maybe they thought that since idols and gods weren't real it didn't matter if you ate meat

sacrificed to them, it didn't matter if you said "Caesar is Lord" since you know it was just a fiction anyway, no one really took it seriously that he was god. So no harm, no foul.

Besides how could you even live or survive in a city where there were idols and gods for everything and where all your friends and acquaintances and neighbors and co-workers were pressuring you to go to the various feasts?

They were trying to straddle the fence, and reconcile contradictory principles and practices from Christianity and the culture.

Christ's Challenge, Threats and Promises, 2:16-17.

Jesus has something to say about the moral decline in His church. He is a jealous Lord and will not tolerate falsehood, false teaching, heresy and lies, calling good evil and evil good.

Jesus rebukes them and calls them to *repentance*. With Jesus where there is always the hope of repentance. Repent before sin gets a foothold or stronghold and it's too late.

Notice in Scripture it is always repentance or judgment. There is no middle ground, there is no compromise. We are called out of the world to be separate from the world. We are called to renounce our former way of life, and to walk in the Spirit.

If we don't do battle with sin we will find ourselves doing battle with the Lord. Jesus was calling the church in Pergamum to take the necessary steps of discipline to bring those holding to false teaching to repentance, before they faced the judgment of Christ.

To the one who conquers, to the one who doesn't try to find safety in compromise, who doesn't try to make themselves at home in the world, to him *Christ makes two great promises*. He promises two special privileges to those who resist and overcome the temptations that will come.

Christ promises that those who resist compromise and don't eat the devil's food at the devil's table will receive *hidden manna*, they will feed on Christ Himself.

Idolatry is always a desire to meet a felt need. Jesus offers something better than what any idol could offer. You don't need other gods when what Jesus offers truly satisfies.

To those who resist the Satanic feast spread before us every day by the world, he will receive a heavenly feast of spiritual manna, not as the world gives but as Jesus gives.

In John 6 Jesus compares Himself to manna, the true bread from heaven.

John 6:48-51 "I am the bread of life. 49 Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. 50 This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.”

Jesus promises us that if we refuse the unholy food of this world He will sustain us with true bread.

The *white stone* with a new name is harder to interpret.

The white stone suggests purity and beauty and holiness in contrast to sexual impurity. The new name which no one knows except the one who receives it suggests a new intimacy with God, a private communication between God and the one who overcomes and conquerors.

The new name may also be an allusion to the new name given at baptism, that place and symbol of the conquering Christian declaring his new allegiance to Christ and receiving his new name, Christians. A new name and a new life, an eternal life.

Christ holds out to us His personal invitation to the true and everlasting pleasures of His banquet in heaven to all who remain loyal to Him.

In a culture that is anti-Christian there can be a lot of fear and insecurity about what will happen if because of my faith I lose my job or lose my security. Jesus promises to take care of us as we stand for Him.

Matthew 6:33 Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Application and conclusion.

Jesus called Ephesus to turn their cold hearts back and love Christ again.

Jesus called Smyrna not to fear in the face of coming suffering.

Jesus called Pergamum not to compromise in the face of great temptations to do so.

These sins were present in the OT church, in the NT church and they are present in the 21st century American church. It pains you to hear that and it pains me to say it.

Denominations and churches are finding it harder and harder to resist subtle friendship with the world. The distinction between the world and the church continues to get more and more blurred. Evangelicals long the banner carriers of the truth of God's Word and living in obedience to it are now wavering, surrendering here and there, small things at first and then larger and larger.

Where is the teaching of the Nicolaitians among us today? Where are there pastors, teachers, authors of Christian books who are advocating immorality, who are mixing Christian values and

cultural values? Who is suggesting we minimize sin or compromise or become more progressive and modern and relevant?

The teaching of the Nicolaitans is evident in the most recent Banner with the news of a few churches in Grand Rapids hosting events promoting the full participation in the church of all people including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. A new group of CRC members has formed called All One Body advocate and lobby for this change.

In the name of diversity and tolerance alternate lifestyles and orientations are being encouraged and accepted. If we are going to be relevant and be able to relate to all kinds of people we are going to have to bend here and there. There are no new temptations just the same old ones repeated again and again.

The problem with the church in America is there is increasingly too much tolerance and compromise and not enough discipline, not enough saying that is sin, not enough calling to repentance. Like the world the church is becoming soft on sin and hard on those who point out sin.

We must never flirt with sin, we must never make excuses for sin, we must never throw our hands up in and give in to sin, we must never become comfortable with sin. We need always to see sin for what it really is and repent of it.

We need an uncompromising proclamation of the Gospel, the good news that while we are sinners, Christ died on the cross for our sins, to break the power and bondage of our sin and to set us free for a life of faith and holiness. We need to glory in the cross and in Jesus and in the truth of His Word.

James 4:4 You adulterous people! Do you not know that *friendship with the world is enmity with God*? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

Our God is a jealous God, it is not possible to serve two masters, God and sin. The lusts of the flesh are not of God, they don't promote His glory and improve our spiritual growth. It doesn't promote holiness, love for God, love for the cross.

Where have we compromised, where have we turned from the Word to the world?

Where are we under pressure to give into the culture and go along with the tide of the world?

He who wavers between two opinions will falter. He who hesitates will lose courage. He who doubts will be like a wave of the sea tossed to and fro. To compromise is to be defeated and to rob God of His glory and the cross of its power and the Word of its truth.

Brothers and sisters, fight the good fight. Don't grow weary in the battle with sin. Overcome, persevere to the end, feed on the manna from heaven which is Christ and His Word. Abide in Him and He will abide in you.

He knows you, He knows your name, He loves you. There is no better love than His and there is nothing in this life better than or worth more than Him.

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world.

I Peter 2:11-12 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.