

Series Revelation

This Message #5 Revelation 2:12-17

We are examining the church fellowships in the province of Asia Minor which are described in the book of Revelation. These fellowships were typical of those which have existed throughout church history, and exist today. For example, the church in Ephesus was doctrinally correct, but there was a lack of genuine deep love for God and others. The church Smyrna was under severe persecution and the only resource of believers was Jesus.

Revelation indicates that Jesus walks among all congregations and is intimately acquainted with the problems they face and with their strengths and weaknesses, just like He is present in the institutions which bear His name today. He knows that some fellowships are legalistic in their attitudes, just like the fellowship in Ephesus. He knows of the suffering of believers in countries like Iran, North Korea, Nigeria, and the many other locations in our world.

When Jesus dictated the letters to be passed on to the fellowships in Asia Minor, He began His assessment of each fellowship with the words, "I know." Jesus complimented the congregations when their actions pleased and honored Him, and from others He demanded repentance and a change of behavior if they were to continue to represent Him. His words were thus an encouragement to some of the readers of the letters and a serious warning to others.

On my trips overseas, I have been asked, on occasion, to help groups of leaders to assess the spiritual health of their congregations. This is an impossible task for me since I am not well acquainted with their local circumstances. I am not like Jesus who knows exactly the cultural milieu and the heart attitudes and circumstances of every believer. However, there is a way I can help my friends. Here is what I do: I have the group read about the churches in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, and then I request them to imagine that they are Jesus giving His assessment of the Church in their city or village. I ask them to write their assessments in the style of what Jesus dictated to John.

The results have always been very revealing. For the most part, the leaders are aware of the pressures and opposition that believers face in their communities. They know their personal strengths and weaknesses as leaders, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the believers under their influence. When everyone has finished writing, I have each leader read the letter he has written to everyone else, and I have a secretary record each characteristic which is presented.

When the exercise is completed, there are two lists: one of the characteristics and behaviors which are pleasing and honoring to Jesus, and another list of spiritual improvements that must be made before Jesus would be pleased. I then ask the group to prioritize the items on the two lists and to discuss how the good characteristics can be strengthened and the weaknesses eliminated.

Jesus wants each of His churches, His lampstands, to shine brightly in our dark world and to be a strong testimony to the non-believers who live in their communities. Because Jesus is Lord of all, and the Church is His body of believers on earth, He has the authority to correct errant behavior and demand repentance. Jesus expects His followers to love one another, persevere in the midst of afflictions, and hold true to His name. For those who are faithful, He promises blessings in this life and for eternity.

The church fellowship we are focusing on today was in the city of Pergamum, a city about 70 miles north of Smyrna. Pergamum was the capital of the Asia Province of the Roman empire, and the seat of Roman imperial power in Asia. The first of the temples for state-sponsored worship of the Roman emperor was built in Pergamum, and the city became the center of emperor worship in Asia.

Pergamum was an intellectual center in the Roman empire. The public library in the city was the second largest in the known world at that time, containing more than 200,000 handwritten scrolls. Tradition holds that parchment, the material used for the scrolls, was invented in Pergamum. Prior to the invention of parchment, which is made from animal skins, writers had to obtain papyrus from Egypt and other locations. The Greek word translated "parchment" is "pergamene."

The city was also renowned for its practice of medical arts. The famous temple-hospital of Asclepius, the god of medicine, healing, and physicians, was in the city. Patients came from all over the known world hoping to be healed by the priests of the temple. The symbol of Asclepius was a staff with two intertwined snakes. This continues to be the symbol of medicine today.

That's a very brief introduction to the importance of the city of Pergamum. Now let's read what Jesus said to the church.

Read Revelation 2:12-17

At the beginning of each letter, Jesus cited the description of Himself which matched the conditions and needs of the particular fellowship which was being addressed. Jesus presented Himself to the believers of Pergamum as the One "who has the sharp, double-edged sword." When this characteristic was first introduced in chapter 1, it was stated that the sword came out of the mouth of Jesus, and this description is repeated at the end of verse 16. The "sword" represents the word of God, and, in particular, His words of judgment. The words of Jesus are so powerful that He will not need to use any other weapons to defeat the forces of evil (*See Revelation 19:15, 21*). It is this same "sword" which Jesus can use to discipline His followers.

Jesus knew two things about the believers of Pergamum: that they lived in a city which was satanic in nature, and that the believers were loyal and faithful to His name in spite of the persecution inflicted on them. Jesus noted the influence of Satan two times, in verses 12 and 13. A throne represents royal authority and controlling power, and, in some unique way, Pergamum was the seat of Satan's influence, identified as the place where "Satan lives." Scripture indicates that Satan is the "ruler of the kingdom of the air" (*Ephesians 2:2*) and "the ruler of this world" (*John 14:30*), and within this general domain, he apparently has special power locations which are extraordinarily pagan and where the people are more deeply given over to evil practices. Pergamum was one of those places.

The second area of knowledge mentioned by Jesus was the loyalty of the believers. They were remaining true (literally, "holding fast") to Jesus in spite of the pressures put upon them. "Remaining true" meant that the believers had not "renounced their faith" in Jesus "even in the days of Antipas." Apparently those "days" represented an especially difficult time for all the believers.

The main cause of persecution of believers was their refusal to engage in the rituals of the temple worship of Roman gods and goddesses and, even more seriously, their refusal to engage in emperor worship. You will remember that Roman citizens were required to annually declare that “Caesar is Lord,” under the threat of execution.

There is no information about “Antipas,” except that Jesus referred to Him as “my faithful witness,” which was, incidentally, a term applied to Jesus Himself in chapter one, verse five. Satan sought to intimate believers and to undermine loyalty to Jesus by taking the life of one of them, but Jesus sought to strengthen that loyalty by commending the believer who was faithful unto death. The martyrdom of Antipas was an indication of the degree of opposition of the Roman officials toward the believers, and Satan is revealed as the source of their hatred.

Beginning in verse 14, we learn that Jesus was displeased about a few things. The believers were remaining faithful in their behavior in regard to their antagonistic neighbors, but they were allowing heretical teaching to flourish within their church fellowship. This was a significant danger to the spiritual well-being of the entire congregation.

The church in Pergamum seems to have had the opposite problem of the church in Ephesus. You will remember that the Ephesian believers were complimented for identifying and rejecting the Nicolaitan influence. Unfortunately, the Pergamum church had within it individuals who “held to the teachings of both Balaam” and “the Nicolaitans.” The fellowship was suffering from spiritual diseases which were corrupting from within.

The Ephesians had tested the teachings of individuals who claimed to be apostles, and when it was determined that their teachings were false, the pseudo-apostles were excluded from the fellowship. Doctrinal purity was thus maintained. The believers in Pergamum were being deceived by the same kind of false teaching. Although they were successfully withstanding the pressures from evildoers in the city, they were compromising their beliefs and tolerating false teaching.

In order for them to understand what was happening, Jesus brought up the example of the teaching of Balaam. The strange episode involving Balaam is recorded in the Old Testament book of Numbers. Balaam was a Gentile prophet who was hired by the king of the country of Moab to put a curse on the Israelites. Balaam was not permitted by God to do this. Rather he uttered only blessings. However, he offered advice to the king of Moab, suggesting that the Israelite men could be enticed to immorality with the women of Moab and through those relationships be drawn into the worship of the pagan god Baal (*see Numbers 25:1-3; 31:16*).

Jesus did not want the believers in Pergamum to be enticed “to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality” like the men of ancient Israel. These were two areas of significant temptation for new converts. Most of the believers in Pergamum were Gentiles, and Gentile converts would be especially tempted in the areas of idol worship and sexual immorality because such behaviors were ordinary activities of the culture they had been part of before their conversion to Jesus. The Balaamites and Nicolaitans encouraged accommodation with these pagan practices, apparently teaching that it was not necessary for believers to separate themselves from the cultural behaviors around them.

The Apostle Peter described those who followed the ways of Balaam this way: “They mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, while they themselves are slaves to depravity. ... If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.” And then Peter ended his description of these men by saying, “Of them the proverbs are true: ‘A dog returns to its vomit,’ and, ‘A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud’” (*II Peter 2:18-22*).

In verse 16, Jesus demanded that the believers repent of their failure to deal with the heretical teaching in their midst. Improper behavior by one group in the fellowship required action by everyone in the church, and if the entire body of believers would not heed the words of Jesus, then the “sword” of judgment would come from His mouth to fight against those who were disobedient to the ways of God.

We discussed the meaning of the word “repent” two weeks ago when we were focused on the church in Ephesus. The word “repent” means to change direction from previous improper behaviors. In the context of the passage today, repentance required the fellowship to take a strong stance against the Balaamite and Nicolaitan teachers as well as disciplinary action against fellow believers who were following the ways of those false teachers. Jesus made it clear that their failure to do so would bring on His judgment.

Notice the wording in verse 16: Jesus “will fight against them.” In His warning, Jesus made a distinction between the congregation in general and the false teachers. Jesus stressed that He would come to the entire church fellowship, but His wrath would be especially targeted on the heretics and their followers. The essential message of the warning can be simply stated this way: true believers must take action against and reject the heretics in their midst or else Jesus will take action with far more traumatic results.

We do not understand the exact details of the heresies which were corrupting the church at Pergamum, but we can understand the principle behind the criticism of Jesus: He will not tolerate any form of religious syncretism. The person who has placed faith in Jesus as the Redeemer and Savior of mankind, who has been born by God’s Spirit into God’s family, whose citizenship is in heaven, must not accommodate their lives to the attitudes and behaviors of the cultures in which they live.

To quote the Apostle Peter again: “As obedient children, we must not conform to the evil desires we had when we lived in ignorance. Just as he who called us is holy, so we must be holy in all we do; for it is written, ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (*1 Peter 1:14-16*). Compromise with the world always neutralizes the testimony of the church. Jesus is not honored when believers adopt the values, priorities, and pursuits of the world, and, as He said, unless there was a change in lives of the believers, He would come in judgment.

The appeal and promise in verse 17 is personalized. “He who has an ear, let him hear,” and “To him who overcomes” — these statements are addressed to individual believers. Jesus was inviting the church members to change their attitudes and behaviors.

Overcoming in the context of the church in Pergamum meant that believers had to become distinct and separate from the world around them. Faith in Jesus had brought the members of the church into union with Christ, and it would be the purity of their on-going faith relationship that would lead them into the abundance and sufficiency of Christ's life and provide them with reward both in this life and on into eternity.

The promise to the overcomer included "hidden manna" and "a white stone." The symbolism of these items have perplexed commentators for centuries. There are many opinions about what they represent, but no one knows for sure. In my opinion, the "hidden manna" is reminiscent of the pot of manna which was placed in the ark of the covenant by Moses (*Exodus 16:33-34; Hebrews 9:4*). The pot of manna was a reminder to the Israelites of God's grace and faithfulness in providing their needs in the wilderness for 40 years (*Ps 78:24-25*). There is probably a similar thought here in Jesus' promise. To the believers at Pergamum who refused to eat the food dedicated to the pagan gods, Jesus promised to give heavenly manna to sustain them spiritually.

I link the statement in verse 17 to words spoken by Jesus in the Gospel of John, where He said, "I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But I am the bread that came down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. ... Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me" (*John 6:48-51, 57*).

Jesus also promised to give to the overcomer a white stone with a new name. There is even more perplexity about the meaning of this stone. It is my opinion that the stone is provided to those believers who repent and bring their lives into conformity with what Jesus wants. The "new name" would represent the changed character of the individual. There are several examples in Scripture of name changes. Abram's name was changed to Abraham to signify his new role as the father of many. Simon's name was changed to Peter because he would be a solid rock for the Church. After his martyrdom, Antipas was identified as Jesus' "faithful witness."

Only Jesus understands the pressures of cultural temptations endured by the individual believer, and for the believer who “overcomes” and does not “renounce their faith in Him,” Jesus gives the “white stone with the new name written on it.” Believers who refuse to compromise their loyalty to Jesus in order to satisfy their human desires or to make their lives more comfortable among non-believers, will benefit from a deep intimate relationship with Jesus that only Jesus and the individual know. The “new name” represents the new character of the overcomer, and his/her new status as a person wholly devoted to Jesus and separated from the world.