

TO THE CHURCH AT PERGAMOS

Revelation 2:12-17

Intro: We come today to the third of the cities which our Lord addressed in giving to His Church, the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ. The first three cities were located in a line from south to north along the coast of the Aegean Sea – first Ephesus, then above it less than one hundred miles was Smyrna, and above Smyrna probably all of a hundred miles, especially “as the crow flies, was located the city of Pergamos. Pergamos was the farthest north of any of the seven cities. From Pergamos it was necessary to go inland and slightly south to Thyatira, then almost directly south to Sardis. East of Sardis about fifty miles was Philadelphia. And then dropping on south to a level almost equal with Ephesus, was Laodicea, which was located near Colosse and Hierapolis.

Pergamos was located in a very beautiful part of the Roman province of Asia, and it became even more prominent after the Bible was completed. But spiritually Pergamos was like so many of the cities in that area: the trend was down and away from the truth. From what I have been able to learn it is called Bergamos today. The church and the heathen religions which once were there, have been reduced to practically nothing, and minarets of the Moslem religion are everywhere.

But what we are interested in is the condition of the church which was there at the end of the first century. The Lord Jesus followed basically the same plan in writing to Pergamos that we have seen in His letters to the churches at Ephesus and Smyrna.

We see first the address in verse 12. The letter was written to the angel, or messenger, of the church at Pergamos, and the Lord describes Himself as John saw him according to Rev. 1:16. (Read.)

In verse 13 the Lord commended the church. In verses 14 and 15 He rebuked the church, and that rebuke was followed in verse 16 with a stern warning.

The last verse of the letter contains two things: (1) an urgent appeal for them to hear what the Holy Spirit was saying to the churches, and (2) a wonderful promise.

Now let us consider the message of the letter, and see what it was for the church at Pergamos, as well as learning how this letter can benefit us today.

I. THE ADDRESS (Rev. 2:12).

If we could have visited Pergamos with the Apostle John, or possibly also with the Apostle Paul, we would have been amazed that a church could have ever been established in such a place. It was a center for heathen religions. This is probably why the Lord Jesus said in verse 13 that this is where Satan's throne was at the time, and where he was actually dwelling. It is a testimony to the power of the Gospel that a church could be born there, and that the church could have a testimony in such a place.

I read just yesterday in the writings of John Calvin that Augustine said that the salvation of a single soul was a work that surpassed even creation itself. That is undoubtedly why the Apostle Paul wrote that if any man is in Christ it is a new creation. People are changed completely by the Gospel, and they can never go back and be like they used to be again. This not to say that the church there had an easy time. It did not! And we realize that as we read down through the letter. But Satan's kingdom had been greatly affected in that place where before he had reigned supreme (at least from the looks of things). But when the Gospel came to Pergamos, a work was done which made the Devil himself move there to lead in the opposition. At that time it was from Pergamos that he directed his work throughout the world. Remember that the Devil is not omnipresent like our Lord is. He is like we are. He can only be in one place at a time. But his demonic forces literally encircle the world. He is the god of this world, and he fights back like an angry lion to regain any territory that he has lost to the Gospel.

How large the church was, we do not know. But the work that had been done there was such that the Devil set up his throne there to fight the Gospel and the people of God.

But how does the Lord portray Himself to the church at Pergamos? Read the last part of verse 12. "These things saith He which hath the sharp sword with two edges."

Obviously this is a reference to the Word of God. Cf. Heb. 4:12:

12 For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than

any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

This description of our Lord is important also as we come to the later chapters in this book of The Revelation. Cf. Rev. 19:11, 15-21. This shows not only the mighty power of the Lord, but the sovereign power. It distresses me when I see preachers today turning to all kinds of gadgets and means to entertainment to attract people to the church (and supposedly to the Lord, while they neglected that most powerful instrument which has ever been put into the hands and hearts of men: the living Word of God. The Devil can try to disrupt the work of the church any way he can, but he is no match for the One Who comes with the twoedged sword coming out of His mouth. And those of us who know the Lord must remember that if we become unfaithful, the Lord will use that same Word to bring us back into line. And that use of the Word is not very pleasant to experience.

But now let us look at:

II. THE LORD'S COMMENDATION (Rev. 2:13).

We come again to those now-familiar words, "I know." The situation in all three of the first three churches the Lord wrote to, was different. Some things were good that He knew; other things were not so good, or even bad. But the Lord never got the churches mixed up with each other, as we might. Nor does He ever get believers mixed up. He doesn't commend me for something that you have done, nor does He rebuke you for something that I have done, or failed to do. His knowledge of us all is always completely accurate. And so it was with these seven churches.

What did the Lord know about them and what did He commend them for?

Probably verse 13 should read like this: "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is."

The work of the Lord is never easy. Man by nature is opposed to the Gospel. The Lord's work in Portland is not easy. There are many forces at work, evil forces, which make it difficult to serve the Lord. Oregon is one of the most unchurched States in the United States. I am sure that the Devil has been here often, but that is not like saying that his throne from

which he operates throughout the world, is here. It may be! I don't know. But the Lord said that the Devil's throne was in Pergamos in those days. And so this meant that the work there was both difficult and dangerous. But in spite of the fact that Satan's throne was there, the Lord commended the church for two very important things:

- 1) "Thou holdest fast My Name."
- 2) "And hast not denied My faith."

What did the Lord mean by these statements of approval?

Well, to hold fast to the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ means that they were faithful to Christ as a Person. They boldly declared that He was the Son of God Who had come in human flesh for the purpose of saving sinners through His sacrificial death on the Cross. And declaring this they were saying that He was and is the only Savior, that all other religions are false. The Christians in Pergamos were not ashamed of the Gospel, nor were they ashamed of Christ. They did not preach a message of self-exaltation. They exalted the Name of Christ.

And you could not do that unless you were faithful to "the Faith." The Greek says lit. *the faith of me*. They were a group of believers who were faithful to the Word of God, not only in their witnessing and preaching, *but in their living*. They backed up their voice messages with their lives. And it is this combination that means *power*. All too often the inconsistencies in our lives puts a muffler on the message we are seeking to proclaim. As far as these issues of vital importance, the church at Pergamos drew an A+!

Again let me remind you of Heb. 6:10. God does not overlook, nor does He forget, even a cup of cold water given in His Name. And in commending the believers at Pergamos, our Lord was emphasizing how extremely important these two points always are. I wonder if the Lord could give us the same kind of commendation. Our main objective in life and in our fellowship together as His people, should always be to please Him. And so the Lord wanted them to know that He knew that they were doing well in a very difficult place – *right under the eye of the Devil himself!*

And the people had been faithful even though one of their number, a man by the name of Antipas, possibly their Pastor, had been martyred rather than to turn his back upon his Savior, or to reject the teaching of the Word of God. The Devil's plan is to kill the Pastor and hope that that will put an end to the church. But it didn't in Pergamos. It didn't in Jerusalem.

The gates of Hades will never prevail against the church. But the Devil wants to intimidate God's people by killing their shepherd. However the blood of the martyrs only serves to strengthen the church and make its witness in the world that much stronger and that much more effective.

Now it would have been wonderful if the Lord's letter to Pergamos could end there. But what we have read so far was not the whole story. The Lord's commendation of the church was followed by:

III. HIS REBUKE (Rev. 2:14-15).

At this point we all should go back to Numbers 22, 23, and 24 to read the story of Balaam. He is a mysterious person who was a prophet, and yet was anything but a true prophet. He was approached by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the children of Israel. But the Lord refused to let him do it. He was a prophet for hire, and is remembered in the NT as a man who sought to serve the Lord for what he could get out of it in the way of financial return.

But what the Lord would not allow Balaam to do by way of cursing the children of Israel, he did another way. And we learn here in verse 13 what he did. He taught Balak to bring a curse on the children of Israel in another way, the way of compromise. Balak got the children of Israel to eat meat offered to idols, and then to take a step further, "to commit fornication."

There is no end to the road of compromise. It has led many of God's people down the pathway to wreck and ruin. It always starts with things that seem perfectly harmless, but then it goes on to more serious departures from the truth. The Israelites never suspected that eating meat offered to idols could lead them into sexual immorality, *but it did!* No one can play with sin and come out the victor. I notice the word "compromise" is often coming out of the mouths of our politicians. I am afraid that is the way they do business in much of government today. And when this happens, regard for truth goes out the window!

There has been a lot of discussion among Bible teachers as to what "the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes was, but I think that verse 15 in our text makes it very clear that it was Balaamism under a new name. Solomon said that there is nothing new under the sun. Balaamism is prevalent in churches today. It sounds good, but it leads to disaster. I have noticed

that there is an issue coming to the surface today that was quite strong thirty or forty years ago. And that is that it's OK for Christians to drink alcoholic beverages as a means of getting next to unbelievers in the world. Christians are being taught that we can win through compromise, but loosening up a little. And then the loosening continues until, as with the Israelites, there were no restraints at all.

How does the Lord feel about compromise? Read verse 15 of our text. He *hates* it! He doesn't tolerate it; He hates it! He hates it because He knows where it will lead His people. I know of a family whose daughter got in with a group of professing Christian young people in California who thought it was smart to drink. Her parents even followed her in drinking. They looked upon Christians who didn't drink as stuffy, and not with it – until one day when their daughter came home and told them that she was pregnant. Then everything changed. But the change was too late to avoid a real tragedy.

The Lord did not indicate that this compromise with the truth had taken over the church at Pergamos, but they were making the mistake of allowing some of these advocates of compromise, of Balaamism, to continue on in the church.

And so the Lord issued:

IV. HIS WARNING (Rev. 2:16).

What did they need to do? The Lord told them in one word: "Repent." The Greek says, "Therefore repent." You see it was not only sinful to eat meat offered to idols, and to commit fornication, but it was sin, a great sin, to even allow it to remain in the church. As long as that attitude, that way of life is represented, somebody is going to get hurt, and hurt badly. There is no such thing as compromising with sin, and winning. The compromiser always loses – ALWAYS!

This is a message for the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ today. It is a message for our church. It is a message for all of us individually. If you compromise with what the Lord hates, you are going to be the loser. And He hates sin in every form. The coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to die for sinners, not only shows His great love for His people, but it shows His great hatred for sin. The world needs to repent, but the church does too.

I often think of two verses in particular in Hebrews 1 which have a very powerful message for people who are looking for happiness – and that includes us all. These two verses are a quotation of Psa. 45:6 and 7. But let me read them to you as they appear in Heb. 1:8 and 9:

8 But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.

9 Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.

God's prescription for true happiness is that we, like our Lord, are to love righteousness, and hate iniquity. It comes with God's guarantee.

Now we come to:

V. THE LORD'S APPEAL (Rev. 2:17a).

We have had it twice before, and we are going to have it four more times before we get through these letters. What is it? "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

When you came to Sunday School and then our morning service, did you ask the Lord to enable you to hear with your ears? Have you gotten the Lord's message to the church at Pergamos? It is for us as a church, and it is for us individually. In the light of what the Lord said here, we all need to ask the Lord to show us if we need to repent for the way we have become careless about sin. If we need to repent, let's do it before we leave to go home. You can do it right where you are, silently speaking to the Lord, seeking His forgiveness and cleansing through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But before we leave, let me point out:

VI. THE LORD'S PROMISE (Rev. 2:17b).

The promise is to the overcomer. Like the Lord's promises in the previous letters as well as those yet to come, there may be a present fulfillment of the promise as well as a future fulfillment.

One expositor has said that no two expositors fully agree on the meaning of these words, but we know that it is a promise of blessing, probably of special blessing for the person who separates himself from sin and the

ways of the world, to walk in obedience to the Lord. All of it speaks of special blessing, and probably special fellowship with the Lord for those who seek to live to please Him.

Concl: I hope that we all always come to church to learn. I hope that is the reason we read our Bibles. We need to learn more about God, more about the Lord Jesus Christ, more about the Holy Spirit, and more about ourselves! It is in the Word that we learn what we need to know to make us the people that the Lord wants us to be. But hearing must be followed by doing, doing the will of God, seeking by God's grace to be what He wants us to be. That is where the blessing is.