

STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

JESUS LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN PERGAMUM

Read Revelation 2:12-17

Introduction

Pergamum, a city of the Roman province of Asia, in the west of what is now Asiatic Turkey, occupied a commanding position near the seaward end of the broad valley of the Caicus. It was probably the site of a settlement from a very early date. Pergamum was one of the most prominent cities of Asia, located in the western part of Asia-Minor, about 45 miles north of Smyrna and about 20 miles from the Aegean Sea. The modern village of Bergama, Turkey, now covers part of the ancient site.

This city was especially known as a centre for the worship of the god known as Asclepios. Represented by a serpent, Asclepios was the god of healing and knowledge. There was a medical school at his temple in Pergamos. Because of the famous temple to the Roman god of healing, sick and diseased people from all over the Roman Empire flocked to Pergamos for relief.

Introduction of Jesus

“These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword” (v12)

Pergamum was a church that was married to the world. They were in compromise with the world, but it is the Word of Christ which transforms us from the world. In Revelation 1:16, John observed that out of Jesus’ mouth went a sharp two-edged sword. Now, Jesus “showed” this two-edged sword to the Christians in Pergamos. Jesus will confront this church with His word, and they will feel the sharp edges.

This reminds us of the passage in Hebrews 4:12: *“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”* Jesus would use this sharp two-edged sword to make some separation among the Christians in Pergamos. Ephesians 6:17 affirms the same – *“the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.”*

The Condition of the Church

“I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. And you hold fast to My name and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.” (v13)

Jesus said to each church that He knows... It is true of each one of us. He knows our works, even if there isn’t much to know.

And where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is: In many ways, Pergamos was a stronghold of Satanic power. There are many different opinions as to why Pergamos was such a stronghold of Satanic power. Some believe it is because Pergamos was a centre of pagan religion, especially of “Asclepios Soter” or “Asclepios saviour.” Some believe it was because Pergamos had a huge throne-like altar dedicated to the Roman god Zeus. Some believe it was because Pergamos was a centre for the ancient Babylonian priesthood, but this is tough to prove conclusively. Others believe it was because Pergamos was the political centre of the worship-demanding Roman government. Irrespective of the reason, it is, and this church knows it or have just discovered that they are right at the centre of where Satan’s throne is.

Despite the fact they lived in such a difficult city, the Christians of Pergamos held fast to their faith in Jesus (hold fast to My name... did not deny My faith). Jesus praised the Christians of Pergamos because

they did not deny His faith. It is always important to make sure that the faith we hold on to is the faith that belongs to Jesus.

Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you: One specific man among the Christians of Pergamos received a precious title (faithful martyr). This same title was held by Jesus also (Revelation 1:5). Antipas was a man who followed Jesus, who was like Jesus. Antipas lived where Satan's throne was. Yet he stood against the attacks and the evil around him. He fulfilled the meaning of his name because Antipas means "Against All."

The Problem with the Church at Pergamum

"But I have a few things against you because you have there, those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. Thus, you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate." (vv14-15)

The Christians in Pergamos were rightly praised for holding fast to the name of Jesus and keeping his faith. At the same time, their difficult environment did not excuse the few things Jesus had against them. The two key problems with this church are:

They held the doctrine of Balaam: Balaam was a prototype of all corrupt teachers. According to Numbers 22-24 and 31, Balaam combined the sins of immorality and idolatry to please Balak, the king of Moab, because he could not curse Israel directly. When Balaam counselled Balak, he taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel. The stumbling block related to idolatry (to eat things sacrificed to idols) and sexual immorality. The church in Pergamos had those who did hold the doctrine of Balaam, it showed they had tendencies towards both idolatry and immorality.

They also held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans: In Revelation 2:6, Jesus praised the Ephesian Christians because they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. But the Nicolaitans also had their doctrine, and some among the Christians of Pergamos held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. The reference to the Nicolaitans identifies the group who were teaching Balaamism (doctrine of Balaam). Note the words "thus ... in the same way" of verse 15.

Pergamum Christians were subjugating the people to Satan's authority by teaching compromise with the world which always neutralizes the church by compromise. The church loses its pilgrim perspective and adopts the viewpoint, values, priorities, and pursuits of the world. Whoever the Nicolaitans were, they were conquering the people by bringing them under Satan's authority through influential teachers who were tolerating or even promoting evil or licensing it. According to ancient commentators, the Nicolaitans also approved of immorality.

You have those there... you also have those: The rebuke was not only against those who hold the doctrines of Balaam and those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. The rebuke was also against those who allowed them to continue (you have there those... you have those).

The Christians of Pergamos were like the Christians of Corinth as Paul wrote to them in 1 Corinthians 5:1-9. They were too tolerant and accepting of false doctrines and immoral living, and Jesus had to rebuke them. Satan couldn't accomplish much by persecution, because many did hold fast, like Antipas. So, Satan tried to accomplish his goals by using deception. The strategy was first violence, then alliance.

A difficult environment never justifies compromise. It is easy for a church in such difficulty to justify this compromise in the name of “we need all the help we can get” – but no church needs that kind of help.

Jesus Recommendation

“Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.” (v16)

The simple word repent stands out. Five of the seven churches are commanded to repent. Repent is a command that applies to Christians, not only to those who first come to Jesus but also to those already in Christ. Unless they do repent, the Christians of Pergamos would face the Jesus who has the two-edged sword. Judgment will begin at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17). When Jesus came against the Christians of Pergamos, He will confront them with His Word.

Repentance is used in Scripture in at least three ways:

1. A repentance that is merely a change of mind about something in a context that does not deal with salvation (Matt. 21:28-32). It is a real repentance, a change of mind, with a real result, but it has nothing to do with salvation.
2. A repentance that is unto salvation. In a context dealing with salvation or eternal life, etc., it has to do with changing one’s mind about one’s condition in sin and need of the saving work of God in Christ. It is equivalent to faith or a part of faith like two sides of a coin. First, we acknowledge our sinfulness and inability to save ourselves, and then (the other side of the coin) we turn to Christ in faith as the only means of salvation.
3. Then there is a repentance that deals with some spiritual issue in the Christian life in which repentance is a change of mind concerning the path we are following and is equivalent to confession of specific sins with a view to spiritual change, pursuing the path of godliness. This is the usage in these letters.

All Christians needs to live in the Word, the two-edged sword, which penetrates and transforms us by the renewing of the mind with the mind of Christ (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 2:16). This includes keeping our focus on eternal treasures. The alternative is divine discipline on the basis of that same Word, which, if neglected, results in our discipline according to the warnings and principles of Scripture.

Jesus’ Conclusion

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” (v17)

The danger of false teaching and immoral conduct still faces the church today. So does the danger of allowing false teaching and immorality, as was the problem with the Christians in Pergamos. The one who overcomes this spirit of accommodation to false teaching and living will receive hidden manna. This is God’s perfect provision, the true bread from heaven (John 6:41).

What is the meaning of receiving a white stone? In the ancient world, the use of a white stone had many associations. A white stone could be a ticket to a banquet, a sign of friendship, evidence of having been counted, or as a sign of acquittal in a court of law. Jesus may have any one of these meanings in mind, but at the very least we know that it has the assurance of blessing.

What is the meaning of this new, secret name promised to him who overcomes? Is it God’s name, or is it the believer’s name? This is probably the believer’s new name, and the name itself is probably more important than the stone itself. One idea behind this new, secret name is that it shows what an intimate

relationship we have with God. When a couple is close, they often have “pet names” for each other. This is probably the same idea. Another idea associated with the new name is simply the assurance it gives of our heavenly destination. Your name is there, waiting for you. It is as if your “reservation” in heaven is made.