

Letters To Seven Churches (Part Four): Pergamos

Cultural Compromisers

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Among the most potentially feared and most painful of communications is the personal evaluation. Whether it is called a critique or a review, or an assessment or appraisal or examination or even a judgment, an evaluation like this has the potential to rip and gouge into some very sensitive areas of our psyches. Some leadership and life coaches will say, "Hey, critiques and assessments are good tools for evaluating our progress and strengthening our abilities." But I cannot think of anyone who really enjoys a thorough tip-toe inspection. It is just too close.

It could be embarrassing for a person to see his faults and weaknesses brought into the open, especially when we have tried so hard to keep them private and hidden. No one likes to be told they have feet of clay. No one wants to hear that they are wrong or that their work is substandard. No one likes other people to know that they have failings or inconsistencies or incompetencies. No one wants to be told that they have peaked at a subpar level. Even if the words are never spoken, no one likes to hear that they are a loser, inferior to others, a has-been, or a failure; a drain on the resources of a family or a company or an institution. We may put on an impassive facade upon hearing those things, but it really hurts. It hurts deep down, and it does not go away, at least not for a while.

Of course, evaluations can be positive if we have been on the ball, if we have been competent, if we have been going the extra mile. We might have been the employee of the month for the past six months running and such an efficient worker that we are outperforming everyone around us. That does not happen very often, though. We may have no obvious flaws and do such good work that the boss has nothing to critique or to recommend, but to say, "Keep up the good work. You'll have my job before long." If we are like this, we have obeyed Solomon's suggestion in Ecclesiastes 9:10, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."

Now, the letters to the seven churches are divine evaluations, they are divine judgments, critiques, assessments of workers in God's institution, the church. Some in those letters are pulling their weight, while others seem to be slacking off. Some are lazy and distracted and others are gung-ho and overachievers. Most, though, tend to be a mixed bag, having some positive traits and having other negative traits that seem to balance things out. But they all get evaluated, and upon their evaluation, they all get to keep their jobs. Some are praised, some are encouraged to improve, some are admonished to reform, and others are threatened with swift termination if they do not get their acts together. What we find in the letters to the seven churches is an expansion of what Paul said in II Corinthians 5:10, "All must appear before the judgment seat of Christ."

We are going to continue our study with the letter to Pergamos in Revelation 2, verse 12 down through verse 17. Remember, we are approaching these letters not as prophecies as is most often done, but as epistles from a person, like the epistles from Paul were written to these various churches to give encouragement and help so that they could make it into the Kingdom of God. We are not trying to see who or which church fits Christ's descriptions in them, but to understand and use Christ's words and His insight into the seven churches to spot and overcome our faults. Wherever we may find that we appear in these in these letters in some way, and then change and be worthy to see His face when He comes to stand before Him. All right, we are going to read the letter to Pergamos here to begin. We will read these six verses and then we will begin trying to understand what is going on here.

Revelation 2:12-17 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: "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. 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. Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My

mouth. 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."

By the way, the city of Pergamos was also called Pergamon as well as Pergamum. Today it is modern Bergama, which pretty much leaves off the whole ending altogether. And I just throw in at this point that the word means "citadel."

The church of Pergamos, though, is one of those mixed bag churches. More like Ephesus, which was both praised and threatened. Remember, He said that they had had good works against those who call themselves apostles and such, but they were also threatened to have their candlestick taken out of out of their place because of their lack of love. They forgot their first love, right? Pergamos is less like Smyrna, though, which received only praise and encouragement.

Now we know from our study of Ephesus that Christ only had one big thing against the Ephesians and if we go back to verse 4, He says, "Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love." That was their one big error, one big problem. But unfortunately for the people of Pergamos, He says He has a *few* things against them there. They are lot like Ephesus in some ways, but in other ways, they have gone beyond the Ephesians in going away from Christ. But He calls both churches to repent before He comes to them quickly. It is the same thing. "Hey, repent, or I will come to you quickly and I will do something that you will not like," He says. Both of these churches get the same threatening warning.

As you know, as we have been going through these, I have been giving them kind of a pet name, a name that you could help to remember them by what their problem is. For the Pergamenes, which is how you say the people in Pergamos, I have called them "cultural compromisers." He had actually quite a bit from Jude here and I will all them the "spiritual descendants of Lot."

Let me give you background on Pergamos, because it is integral to understanding the message that Christ has here for them. The city of

Pergamos was a large one. It had about 120,000 to 200,000 people in it. The reason why there is such a disparity of figures is because it is not quite known how many people they had in the first century. But they know that a few years into the second century, they had about 120,000 and a few years after that, about 200 AD, they had about 200,000, so they think it might have been less during the time in which the letter was written.

But it lies more than 50 miles north of Smyrna. But unlike Smyrna and Ephesus, it is not a coastal city, but it lies 16 miles inland on the north edge of the Kikuyus plain, and it fits into the region that is called Mysia in northern Asia Minor. It has two rivers, one that flows through it, one that flows around it. They are called the Salinas and the Katyas, and they merge into the Kikuyus River, a few miles downstream from the city. It is not like Pittsburgh where the Allegheny and the Monongahela come together to form the Ohio and they are big rivers, where you can get pretty much ships to go down them. But at Pergamos they were smaller rivers, and you could only navigate from the beginning of the Kikuyus River on a small craft. So from that you would know that they are not a huge trading city. They could not get the big barges up and down the river to Pergamos.

What it had going for it, at least in the minds of the Pergamenes, is that it was the longtime seat of the Roman government in Asia, and it vied with Ephesus and Smyrna for that honor for many decades. We are not quite sure whether it moved or not, but for a long, long time the seat of the governor was in Pergamos.

The name of the city, Pergamos, comes from a small conical mountain or a large hill (we would consider it a small mountain at 1,099 feet), that looms over the lower parts of the city. Now this is a steep sided massif, almost like the cone of a volcano, it just popped up out of the plain, and it is a natural defensive formation. But it has access only on the southern side. So if you are looking at it from the south, you could actually find a way to get up to the peak. And if you are looking at it from the south, it looks like a big throne. It was on the top of this big citadel where the city's earliest structures were built and then the place was fortified. So as you could see from the southern view of this conical mountain, you might think that it looks like a throne. As Jesus says in the letter, where Satan's throne is might be what He is referring to. Most people think not, though.

Now atop this citadel, one of its kings, a man named Eumenes the Second, built a massive altar there to Zeus. It is so massive that the structure itself is about 100 feet by 100 feet. It is huge. The whole thing is the altar. And so when you look at it atop the citadel from far away, that itself looks like a great throne, the throne of Zeus, and perhaps it was also partially dedicated to Athena. So this also may be something that Christ alludes to in terms of it being the throne of Satan.

We should also let you know that the city also featured temples dedicated to Athena, to Dionysus, Hera, Demeter, and Persephone. And it also had one temple that was dedicated to two Egyptian gods, Isis and Serapis. So there are plenty of temples that were going on there or that one could visit there in Pergamos and I have mentioned just the major ones. It also boasted a large resort. We would call it a spa today, and a temple dedicated to Asclepius. He was the god of healing. So people would come from all over the empire and it did not matter what status they were. It could be peasant, it could be king or emperor. They would come to Pergamos to purify their minds and bodies by bathing in the springs sacred water. And they also came there to sleep in its dormitory, of all things. Because it was said that if you slept there by Asclepius' Temple that Asclepius would supposedly appear in the person's dream to tell them how to cure their illness.

Now they were far, far ahead of their time. There at Asclepius' temple, which by the way, was called the Asclepion, they had essentially therapy dogs that wandered around and you could pet them, and you know, whatever you wanted, to play fetch. But have they really gone beyond us! They had therapy *snakes*. Nonvenomous snakes were part of the healing practices of Asclepius. By the way, the snake symbol is all over Pergamos, and you find it as part of the iconography of all the patron gods of the city. You find snakes as symbols of Zeus, of Athena, of Asclepius, and Dionysus, which were the four patron gods of the city. Both Isis and Serapis, again the Egyptian gods, were also associated with serpents. In fact, the name Serapis in Egyptian means snake or serpent. That is another possibility why Pergamos could be called the place where Satan dwells.

Finally, under Caesar Augustus, the one called Octavius, Pergamos was the first city in the province of Asia in which the Imperial cult was established.

They were given this honor, and they built sanctuaries, then, to the goddess Roma—Rome—and to the emperor himself. This rare honor of being given the permission to build these things for the Emperor cult, was called a Neocorate, which literally means temple sweeper. And it came to mean a temple warden or a person who took care of the temple. And so the city itself then was designated the temple warden of the Imperial cult. And this did not happen just once for Pergamos. Most cities that got this honor got it only once. Pergamos got it three times, so not only was it done under Caesar Augustus, it also happened again in AD 113 under Trajan and then under Caracalla in the early third century. So within about 200 years, they had this honor bestowed upon them three times.

Why? Well, the simple fact is the city of Pergamos was extremely loyal to Rome. Like Smyrna, it was one of the first to become part of the Roman Empire and it was fanatical about giving divine honors to its emperors. It was absolutely essential for citizens of Pergamos to be seen making the sacrifice at the temple to Roma and to the emperor. And this clearly caused trouble for the Christians there because they would not do it. That was idolatry. And so in Pergamos if you failed to give these honors to the Emperor, you could be charged with atheism. Now it does not mean what we think it means. You know, we think it means a belief in no kind of deity, no God at all. But in that time, in classical Rome, atheism meant the denial of other gods, only your god was the true god and atheism was your denying that there were any others that had any power.

Failing to sacrifice to the emperor was seen as disloyal and unpatriotic and such a person was likely to be called a hater of mankind because you were not doing your part to keep up the favor of the god, the emperor, and of course, the emperor had the prerogative to come down harshly on those who were not loyal to him. In Pergamos, the Christians faced the pressures of a pagan society daily. And it was not just a pagan society. In Pergamos, it was a *fanatical* pagan society.

For instance, if a Christian refused to accept an invitation to attend a feast in honor of a pagan deity, they would not only be shunned, but they could lose their jobs or businesses. People would consider them outcast, not fit to live on the earth. On top of that, they would be called all these names like atheist and hater of mankind.

By the way, for this reason, there were few Jews in Pergamos because they were monotheists too. They believed in one God. And so they stayed away from the city because they knew that if they would go to the city, they would face the same kind of persecutions that the Christians did. They were not there in any numbers that had any kind of influence in the city. So that is one good thing for the Pergamenes. They did not have to face Jewish persecution to any great degree. Unlike the Smyrnans just down the road who had a great deal of trouble with the Jews there.

Another possibility for the description of where Satan's throne is or where Satan dwells is simply that all of this pagan religious activity that was going on in the city showed where Satan was working, where he had great influence. We could call Pergamos the seat of Roman paganism in Asia. They had everything there that you could possibly want from a religious standpoint, and it was all out of the fertile mind of Satan. So the church members there in Pergamos were surrounded by all of this and constantly pressured by it to conform to it, not only for religious reasons, but also for cultural and economic reasons. If they wanted to get along with their neighbors, or if they wanted to keep their jobs, well then they were being pressured to make these sacrifices to the various gods there, particularly the Emperor cult.

How can we think of this in terms of our lives? Well, if it could ever happen that the Christians in this country would become fanatical once again, you know, start doing the blue laws, like down in the south, you know, the Bible Belt comes up strong and starts kicking out all those who they consider to be heretical or cults, then maybe it would feel like that, where we would be constrained to work on the Sabbath by some means or another. Or they would reinstitute all the blue laws or what have you. That is kind of how it would be.

But we do not have that here anymore. It has gone over to something entirely different. America is becoming fanatically *secular*, fanatically atheistic or agnostic, fanatically *progressive*. Fanatically ideological and liberal, and we are seeing in America that people are being forced to conform to these, I do not even want to call them mores—ideas, beliefs—of the liberal left. And if you do not do it, then you are out. You are out of favor and things could

come upon you one way or another economically, in terms of a job or some type of advancement, and who knows what it will eventually get to. You can see this in the news media. You try to be a conservative and go into the news media, you are going to find doors shut all over the place simply because you will not conform to their ideology. So it is coming. It is that sort of thing. It is just going to take a different form for us. Perhaps in the next years in front of us.

Let us break down Revelation 2:12 and the verses after it, because I want you to see how all of what I have just said in terms of the background fits into what Jesus says to them. He opens this up with a bang, and it is very blunt. The thought pervading this entire epistle from Jesus Christ is introduced right here in verse 12.

Revelation 2:12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamos write [This is the first words He says.], 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword.'

It is the briefest of all the descriptions of Christ among the seven letters. It is only one thing. Normally, it is a couple things that He mentions to give the description. He mentions, "I have one thing I want to get across right away here. I'm standing over you with a two-edged sword."

This comes from what is said back there in Revelation 1:16. "He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength." I would like you to notice here that these are all descriptions of Christ in His power. The one about the two-edged sword occurs right in the middle of them. He talks about His right hand holding these seven stars. And who are the seven stars? They are the churches, right? Or they are the angels of the seven churches. He is in control! Then you have the sharp, two-edged sword. And then you have, as it says there at the end, that His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength. He has power that just radiates from Him.

This is what we have to understand that the Pergamenes were standing in front of—in awe. Christ is there with the sword, with all this power and strength, and He says, "Listen, guys." You could understand how that could just cause all sorts of terror. So Christ is standing over the church as a

threatening judge because of the church's sin. Now, this image of a two-edged sword is a carryover from certain prophecies in the Old Testament. I would like to go to one back in Isaiah 66 because I think this one encapsulates what He essentially means with this image, with this metaphor. Notice the verbiage here. Of course, this is the end times he is speaking of.

Isaiah 66:14 When you see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like grass [because he is talking about the Lord coming and vindicating His people and helping them, redeeming them.]; the hand of the Lord shall be known to His servants, and His indignation to His enemies.

He is showing here differentiation among people. There are those who are His, and His hand, meaning all the things that He provides and gives and that sort of thing, and all that He works with will be known to His servants. They will be enjoying reaping the benefits of it and His indignation, on the other hand, though, His wrath, goes toward His enemies.

Isaiah 66:15-17 For behold, the Lord will come with fire and with His chariots, like a whirlwind [Notice these are all very strong ideas.], to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by His sword the Lord will judge all flesh; and the slain of the Lord shall be many. Those who sanctify themselves and purify themselves, to go to the gardens after an idol in their midst, eating swine's flesh and the abomination and the mouse, shall be consumed together, says the Lord. [This goes with what we have read about the letter to the church in Pergamos.] For I know their works and their thoughts.

We do not need to go any further than that, because that brings us right back to where we are in the letter to the Pergamenes here.

This sword that He is holding there brings up these vivid illusions or vivid illustrations of His wrath, and that He is willing now to separate the sheep from the goats. He wants now to put the good ones on His right hand and the bad ones on His left, and He is going to put them into outer darkness, or

where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. He is at that point, and so He is telling them very seriously here that they need to get their act together. Of course, we cannot forget the description of this also in Hebrews 4.

Hebrews 4:12 For the Word of God is living and powerful [There is that word again.], 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.

If you have any idea or any thought of trying to hide something from God, it is not going to happen. He sees all. That is what he says next.

Hebrews 4:13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

So, knowing this also the Pergamenes were saying, "Ahh, He knows everything. I'm doomed!" Or, "Maybe I can squeak by." Does not Peter say the righteous are *scarcely* saved? "I've been doing okay, I've been trying to overcome," but still you are shaking in your shoes and your knees are knocking because this great Judge is standing before us saying, "Wise up! Shape up!"

Anybody familiar with Scripture would know that this image of Christ standing there with a two-edged sword is a terrifying threat of eternal punishment. Immediately the Pergamenes know that their Savior (which is ironic), is deadly serious about the sins in their midst. He wants to be their Savior. But if they are not going to do what He asked them to do, if they do not transform, if they do not get rid of their sin, then He is going to have to turn against them in wrath because of their sins.

It is interesting if we go back to the idea of them being an imperial cult city, Rome had given the rare power of capital punishment, which is called in Latin, Jus Gladii, which was symbolized by the sword, by the way, to Pergamos, to its governor. It was very rare in the senatorial provinces for a governor to have that power. We see it in the hinterlands, like in Judea,

where they had to keep things under control. But here, in these closer areas, Pergamos was one of the very few that had the ability to put people to death. And so they were aware of this as part of their culture in Pergamos.

But they had to understand, Christ is bringing this to their attention immediately, that a much greater judge was in them, was their King. That they were citizens of another Kingdom whose King possessed a far more serious threat in His sword. The sword of His mouth, the sword of His pure and true word, which we find in Isaiah 55:11, never returns to Him empty. It is going to go out and do what He says it is going to do. So we are in no way going to get away with anything with Him. So which judge do you want to face? Do you want to face the Roman governor with the power of *jus gladii*, or do you want to face the great King who has your eternal life in His hand?

Revelation 2:13 "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."

Satan is mentioned twice there in that one verse, and it is an important verse because it sets up the source of their problems, and that is that they live where Satan lives and rules. Jesus, here, first informs us that He knows what is going on, and we can look at that, depending on our perspective, as a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how much sin we have. If we do not have much sin, if we feel confident in our relationship with Christ, knowing that He knows that we live amidst all this satanic activity, it is comforting because we know that He is there to help us through it. On the other hand, if we are guilty, then we know that He knows that we have been compromising. So we could take this both ways, that He knows what is going on, both in their spiritual lives and in Pergamos.

The phrase at the beginning "where you dwell," is answered in the final phrase, "where Satan dwells." It is the same place. They bracket what is between them, accentuating the idea that the sons of light, that is Christians, were dwelling in a city of darkness and they cannot dwell together peacefully. One will have the ascendancy. They will both fight, but one will gain the upper hand or the other. And it is up to the people of God to make sure that they win. Let us go to John the 3rd chapter, right after the born

again statements there at the beginning of the chapter. I want to read versus 16 through 21, then we will jump down to verse 36. But just notice the explanation here.

John 3:16-21 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world [He is the judge, so it be one way or the other], but that the world through Him might be saved. [That is His real purpose here. He wants to save *everyone*.] He who believes in Him is not condemned, but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.

John 3:36 He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides in him.

This is what the Pergamenes were facing. Which side would they fall on? Would they remain in the light or would they fall into darkness and face condemnation by the very One they wanted to save them? So this is the stark choice they faced. They had to make a decision. They had come to understand in themselves and commit to one or the other.

For the most part, here in verse 13, the Pergamenes are commended for clinging to Christ's name and not denying the faith even in the face of persecution. They had done well! Notice, it is past tense. They *had done* well. They do not try to hide the fact that they are Christian. That is the name that they had been given—Christ's people. And they had not repudiated what they had been taught, the faith of Jesus Christ. Their power was in His name and all that it implies, and they had continued to trust in, they had remained loyal to Christ. In this way, they had been like Antipas, faithful witnesses of Him and His way of life.

However, a witnessing church will become a persecuted church over time, especially in the situation where the Pergamenes were in Pergamos where all this satanic activity was taking place. They faced constant harassment and prejudice from their fellow citizens, and sometimes it flared up into violence. So He mentions Antipas, who had taken the worst from the city of Pergamos, and He calls him His faithful witness because he endured to the end. Literally here, it is the faithful martyr. That is the actual Greek term underneath "witness," and I want you to notice chapter 1, verse 5, where the same Greek phrase is also used. He is talking about who is writing the letter. He says, "and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness." He is saying that Antipas had been faithful like Christ had been faithful, all the way to death. He had taken the worst and he had overcome. He had been victorious in his faithful Christian living, Christian life.

This alludes to Isaiah 43:10-12. I will not read that at this time. It is prophecy about God's people being His witnesses. "You are My witnesses," God says, and that is what He wants us to be. And so what He is saying here to them is, "Look, you go back to Isaiah 43 and you'll see what I set there as the standard to be witnesses of God. Antipas did that. He was My faithful witness." He fulfilled both the prophecy and the requirement, or the responsibility, to witness for God, for Christ. I mean, that was quite something. Legend has it that Antipas was roasted in a brazen bull. Not fun at all.

Regarding this Antipas, scholars are at odds about what this means because it could be taken two different ways. His name can be seen as a contraction of Antipatros, which means, "like or compared to the father." Or it could also mean "against the father" because "anti" could actually mean against. It is uncertain. It could imply a spitting image of a man's father. A father would name his son Antipatros because, hey, he looks just like me. Or, on the other hand, one could take the name Antipatros because one has repudiated his father. This is less common. One idea is that Antipas is a symbol of godliness. He is like the Father. You could look at it that way. Or, on the other hand, we could look at it from a negative point of view, that he repudiated the religion of his physical father to take on Christianity. And, of course, he died for that decision.

On the other hand—how many hands do I have?—it could mean something else. You could take Antipas not as a contraction of Antipatros but as its own name, Antipas, and Antipas literally means "against all." Christ, maybe, suggesting that to be faithful to Him as a witness like Antipas was, we need to be willing to stand against all that is contrary to God's way. We need to stick our foot in the ground and not move at all—this far and no further. In other words, we cannot allow ourselves to be tolerant of any sin, of our pets sins, of our secrets sin, of our little weaknesses, or even ones like they faced in Pergamos, that might keep them from feeling the inconveniences and pains of persecution. I do not know which one of those is correct, but it is interesting that it could be considered in all those different ways. They might all be right. I do not know.

Revelation 2:14 [He says] "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 commit sexual immorality."

This tells us what the Pergamenes huge problem was. They live in the midst of a corrupt, satanic society and it is wearing them down. They are starting to give in. Historian Will Durant, you probably heard of him, has the book series, *The Story of Civilization*, gives us a taste of what happened during these pagan festivities in these Greek cities. This is from Volume 2, *Life of Greece*, pages 75 and 185.

At the center and summit of each Greek city, was the shrine of the city god. Participation in the worship of the god was the sign, the privilege, and the requisite of citizenship. In the spring, the Greek city celebrated the Athesterion, or Feast of Flowers. A three day festival to Dionysus, [which happened to be a chief deity in Pergamum], in which wine flowed freely and everybody was more or less drunk. At the end of March came the great Dionysia, a widely observed series of processions and plays accompanied by general revelry. At the beginning of April, various cities in Greece celebrated Aphrodite's great festival, the Aphrodisia. And on that occasion, for those who care to take part, sexual freedom was the order of the day.

That is all we need to read for now. Such a corrupt culture made the Pergamenes very tolerant of sin. Or it had the *ability* to make them very tolerant of sin, just as the Corinthians were to the point that they allowed idolatrous activities and sexual immorality to be practiced among them. That is what it says here in verse 14. "But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam." They were amongst them. There were people there who were doing things like this. Christ indicts them for harboring a group of *compromisers*, and the image of the sword can now be understood as a symbol of threat to the church for not disciplining or evicting that group. For not doing what the Ephesians had done. The Ephesians had kept these things at bay, but the Pergamenes, on the other hand, were allowing them in and letting them stay.

So the Christians in Pergamos staunchly withstood external pressures to compromise from pagan government and religious authorities, but they had permitted an apparently subtle form of compromise to develop internally within the group.

The doctrine of Balaam, if we wanted to go back to Numbers and read this (which we will not) but just in general, it was a ruse inspired by Satan to keep God's people from entering the Promised Land. Remember what Paul said, that he has his devices and that we can learn them, we know them. Well, this is one of them. The doctrine of Balaam has been one of his chief tools for a long, long time. And obviously the parallel for us would be that he uses false teachers under Satan's inspiration to use deceit to keep God's people from entering the Kingdom of God. It is the same thing, very similar.

In the story (if you want to go back and read this in Numbers 25:1-3 and you might want to link that with Numbers 31:8.), it is told there that Balaam used sex to distract, or entrap or entice the Israelites into worshipping other gods. Now it does not come right out and say that it was Balaam that did this, but we find out that Balaam was with them in chapter 31, verse 8 and he gets killed along with all the leaders of Midian. And it is evident from what the Jews have traditionally understood that it was Balaam, as it says here in verse 13, teaching Balak what he needed to do to get the Israelites into sin.

So what was happening in Pergamos? Evidently, the false teachers there were arguing that believers could have closer relationships with pagan culture and with the institutions there in the city and the religions than really was proper. They were teaching that, "Oh, it's not quite so bad. You can go ahead and go to the meeting of the colleges [as they called them], and you can, you know, put a little wine on the ground for the emperor or whatever god that it is. It is just a physical thing. You don't need to worry about that." And that is how likely they rationalized it, by saying that it was only an empty gesture. It did not really mean anything. Because you really do not believe that the emperor's a god, you are just doing this little tipping of the wine glass or you are eating this meat that has been offered to the idol and does not mean anything. So, go ahead and do it. Go ahead and fulfill your patriotic duty or your social obligation. And that is okay, right? As long as you really do not believe that it is to another god, you do not believe they are really gods anyway, right?

Part of the motivation, of course, for these teachers was the threat of economic deprivation. They thought that they were not going to be able to have money one way or the other, of course, if they were dead from all the people in Pergamos that wanted their heads because they were not being patriotic. This goes along with what has been said about Balaam, that he was a false prophet for money. And so these false teachers in Pergamos within the church were probably the same way. They were probably doing this to keep their jobs. To keep money coming in.

I do need to mention here that the word *porneia* that underlies the phrase "sexual immorality," we know from a lot of places in the Bible in our studies in the past, that this carries both literal and metaphorical senses. It is *literal* sexual immorality, and it is also a *metaphor* for idolatry, for being unfaithful to God. It could be physical fornication or it could be spiritual fornication with other gods. Here, the emphasis we have to put on is the spiritual fornication, that is, unfaithfulness toward Christ, which up to this point had been one of their strengths. They had actually been faithful toward Christ. But now these false ministers that were among them, these Balaamites, were beginning to wear them down. Their strength was turning into a weakness.

Revelation 2:15 "Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitan's, which thing I hate."

In combination with Nicolaitanism, which I believe is a disregard for physical behavior because it does not mean anything to true spirituality, as they would have you think. This suggested their problem is tolerating sins of the flesh, and they did not realize that their tolerance of sins of the flesh were leading to not so obvious sins of Spirit. They were thinking that they could go ahead and do this, and it would be no problem. But what it was doing was that it was terribly undermining their faithfulness to Christ. Some suggest that Nicolaitans could be merely another name for the Balaam sect, since their teachings there seemed to be equated here in verse 15. The two names do have a similar meaning. You have probably heard this before, but Nicolas means "he overcomes the people," whereas Balaam means "he rules over the people," so they are very similar.

But I happen to think that they are actually two different groups, and I want to explain the difference here. The Balaamites are false teachers or syncretists who are in it for the money. They could be teaching anything, but they are in it for the money. That is one of the main things that Balaam throughout the entire Bible is known for. That he did it for money, he deceived for money. So in our modern day we would call them preachers for hire, or "name it and claim it" types. Or we would even maybe call them prosperity gospel preachers. They were in it to make a whole lot of money and to be successful. There are those who water down doctrine to keep people in the pews and keep the offerings in the baskets. People who are willing to preach anything just to make sure the money was flowing into the church and into their pockets.

The Nicolaitans are also false teachers, but they are more Gnostic or philosophical in their approach. They are the ideological false teachers. They actually *believe* the things that they are saying. They teach that the physical means nothing, this is where the Gnosticism comes in. The physical means nothing. It is actually cursed. It is not good. And only the spirit is important. It is only what you believe inside that is important. Have you not ever heard? "If you only believe Jesus in your heart, then X, Y, Z, you could do

anything." It did not matter what your body does. It is all about what you believe inside and physical things do not matter now.

This can lead two ways and hardly ever stays in the middle. It will either lead to asceticism where you forsake your body and become just totally spiritual in your thinking and everything. Or, on the other hand, it leads to licentiousness, to lewdness, depending on the personality of the believer. It could go either way. And that is what happened in historical Nicolaitanism. From what we gather from history, Nicolas himself went ascetic. He became someone who fasted all the time and believed that he was better off. He was just thinking about these things all the time and studying and what have you. Whereas those who believed Nicolas' teachings often became epicurean. They would eat, drink, and be merry all the time. But whatever it is, Balaam, the teaching of Balaam, or Nicolaitan heresy, both lead to the same end. That is, disobedience, faithlessness, apostasy, and ultimately to God's wrath. And that is why He puts them together because they both lead to the same very bad end.

Revelation 2:16 "Repent or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth."

Did you notice the pronoun change there? I will come to *you* quickly and fight against *them*.

I just want to add here that Balaam was threatened with being killed by the sword of the Angel of the Lord when he came up with the donkey. That is in Numbers 22, verses 23 and 31. And when he did not heed the warning, he was indeed killed by the sword. That is in Numbers 31:8, which I mentioned earlier. So the same fate is given to those who believe the false teachings of these Balaamites, as was given to the original Balaam. Christ says he would kill them with the sword of His mouth.

Repent here should be read as a sharp command. It should be REPENT(!) or else I will come to you quickly. God hates these disloyalties and these practices so He wants to *emphasize* what we need to do. Repent! Do it now! Do not wait! Do not slack off because it leads to no good! God will not countenance this kind of evil in His church. But if it is there and if it is not repented of it will be punished by God's wrath in time. This "I will come to

you quickly" is what the commentators say is in a vivid Greek present tense, picturing both swiftness and imminence. So do not delay, repent, or Christ's judgment will come down. You can be sure of it and it will come down swiftly. And what happens then is Christ will fight against them. Instead of being the Savior, He becomes the enemy. He becomes the executioner.

Notice that the compromisers here who are punished are no longer considered *you* but *them*. That is why I wanted you to look at that, to think about that for a second. He had been talking to the people there in Pergamos as His people. But at a certain point you became them—like us against them. They become part of the enemy and they are cast from the Body and from eternal life and from the Kingdom of God. You can see how harsh Christ is here. He wants them to change and He is using very hard and serious language, making them see that they are on a very perilous course and they need to turn around right away or they are going to fall into His wrath. So He is deadly serious.

Revelation 2:17 "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 stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it."

So after this command to here, after all the threats, Christ promises three things to the person who overcomes, the one who is victorious in his fight, in his Christian fight. He promises hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name that no one else knows. I will have to admit to you that no one really knows what these mean. We could have some good guesses and I will give you some good speculation. But no one is totally aware of what these things represent. We have some good ideas and I hope these are good ideas that I give you. But we can know, if only this: that they all mean eternal life with God.

As for the hidden manna, the obvious reference then is to the manna which God gave in the wilderness to the Israelites back in Exodus 16. A pot of that was gathered and put into the Ark of the Covenant under the Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat is a symbol of God's throne. So the hidden manna is put under where God judges. God judges from His throne. Remember this idea

of judgment rolls all the way through this letter to the Pergamos'. So I link this hidden manna with the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat and God's throne and judgment. With this link to the Ark, I believe it is a symbol of beneficent judgment from God—that He gives them grace.

It also hints, of course, what do you do with manna? Do you smear it on your face? Do you throw it on the ground again? No, you eat manna. So there is obviously the symbol of *eating* here. So it probably also looks forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb—that He is going to give them His food. They will be there to eat it. You could look at that in Revelation 19:9. I think it also is a reference to Christ being the true manna from heaven, which He talked about in John 6.

If you put all these things together it means that it signifies union with Christ in the Kingdom of God. You will eat *of* Him. You will eat *with* Him, you will pass His judgment, you will be an intimate of Him, and that the hidden manna is hidden means that it is only revealed and offered to God's elect. It is not something for everyone. It is only to those that He calls and chooses.

On to the white stone. In that time, a white stone was commonly associated with a vote of acquittal. If you were part of a jury and you had to judge somebody as either being innocent or guilty, you were given two stones, a black stone and a white stone, and you would cast your vote into an urn by putting in the black stone that he was guilty, or you put in the white stone that he was innocent or acquitted. The white stones, and sometimes *a* white stone, was also sometimes used like a ticket, like a pass of admission to a special occasion. And oftentimes this stone had like a name carved on it so you would come to whatever it was—the party, the feast, the admission to the entertainment—and you would show this stone, and it would have the proprietor's or the owner's name on it, and you would be allowed in.

With this background, the white stone probably refers to God's grace reversing the guilty verdict we deserve because of our sins. And it could also imply a reversal of the world's conclusion that the Pergamenes were subject to there, that they are heretics or weirdos or unworthy because we refused to participate in their idolatrous practices. A white stone may also, then, have the connotation of an invitation to the Marriage Supper like the hidden manna. Now, the white color of the stone obviously portrays the

righteousness of the saints. They did not compromise. They did not soil themselves with sin, and they have been acquitted. Obviously, God has given them the righteousness of Christ.

White is directly associated with righteousness and the righteousness needed to be admitted to the Marriage Supper. Remember that they were given fine linen, clean and bright, which represents the righteous acts of the saints. It says that right there, and in Revelation 19:9. Elsewhere in Revelation, in fact 13 times, white symbolizes righteousness. It can also connote the victory won by the one who conquers through persevering, faith, and righteousness. You can see that in Revelation 19:14.

Let us finally get to the new name. The new name here in verse 17 alludes to the prophecy of Isaiah 62:2-5 and 65:15-19 where it talks about Israel's new standing in the future, that they are given a new name. And, of course, Christians are the Israel of God. In chapter 3, verse 12 in the Philadelphia epistle, it says, "I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name."

So it appears that what we have in 2:17 is kind of a preview of what we see in 3:12. That they are probably the same name. Christ's new name. Although there is wiggle room in the Greek to mean we get ourselves a new name. This idea of a new name written on the stone seems to confirm the idea of an invitation to the Marriage Supper once again, in which intimate fellowship with God occurs.

I should mention here that in the ancient world and the Old Testament too, and even in the New, to know someone's name, especially the name of God, often meant to enter into intimate relationship with Him. If you know God's name, you know the true God. You know His character. And you could therefore have a relationship with Him. Therefore a believer's reception of this name represents their real, true identification and unity with Christ. One has truly come under His sovereign authority and is obedient and faithful in all things.

So we can say to sum all this up, the new name is a mark of genuine membership in the Kingdom of God.

Now there is the phrase here, "which no one knows except him who receives it." This is just like back in John 17:3, where it is talking about to know God, there is eternal life. Well, this refers to experiential knowledge. It is just not knowledge you get in a book. It is knowledge of experience. No one who does not have experience with Christ really understands the relationship of a person with Christ and the way of life that He wants us to have. Certainly those who participate in idolatrous practices do not know the true God or His way of life. Not at all. Yet all true Christians know this in common. We all have this in common, so I believe the sense here of "no one knows except him who receives," it is more like "no one who is outside the Israel of God knows." No one who has not experienced this as an intimate relationship with Christ can have any idea what it means.

So here then the new name would represent a new character. Because now one is associated has the name of Jesus Christ and the character of Almighty God.

What have we learned from the epistle to the church in Pergamos?

Compromise is a killer. Which way you want to die? Do you want to die as a true witness of God or do you want to die on the sword of the Word of God? Compromise, though, is the true killer because it ends in the second death. So we must hold fast to the revealed character and faith of Jesus Christ and endure faithfully to the end. And hopefully those people in Pergamos turned it around and did the same.