

The first letter from Jesus was to Ephesus, a church that was busy with works but had forgotten the love they had at first. (2:4) Fifty miles down the road was another port city Smyrna. The church of that city had endured through trying times and it was about to have even greater testing. (2:10) Another fifty miles further was the capital city of Asia Pergamum. Pergamum was fifteen miles from the coast and said to be the greatest city of Asia. It was built on a conical hill that overlooked the plain. There were four notable temples to Greek gods, and three to Roman emperors who were worshiped as gods. We have no record as to how the church was founded in Pergamum, but we may surmise that it was probably an offshoot of Paul's time in Ephesus. (Acts 19:10)

I want to remind everyone that if your Bible has the words of Jesus in red, each of these letters to the churches is entirely red. They are the words of Jesus dictated to John. (1:11)

¹² *"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. Each letter has an introduction taken from the description of Jesus in chapter one. The choice of the particular part of the description has something to do with Jesus' message to that church. The sharp two-edged sword is mentioned later in this book to describe Jesus' weapon against His enemies. (19:15) In verse 16 Jesus declares that it will be used to fight against them if they do not repent. The author of Hebrews tells us the sword of the Spirit is the word of God. It cuts both ways. It discerns between soul and spirit, in other words, what is of our self and what is of God. It discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12) Like the previous church, we may be going through the motions of doing good things, but God's word discerns our motivations, whether they are selfish or out of love for God and our neighbor. That passage goes on to say that nothing is hidden from His eyes. Everything is laid bare. (Hebrews 4:13) The introductory description of Jesus must have been chilling to those first listeners. It should be to us as well.*

¹³ *"I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. There are various theories as to what is meant by the place where Satan dwells and where his throne is. It could have been any of the temples to the Greek gods or emperors or all of them considered together. Tourists think of our town as the place Satan dwells when they see all the New Age shops and hear about the various cults. Some commentators think Satan's throne was the temple of Asclepius because of the snakes that writhed on that temple floor. The sick would lay on the temple floor hoping one would touch them. They thought that represented the*

Commented [notes1]: Revelation 2:4 (ESV)

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Commented [notes2]: Revelation 2:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Commented [notes3]: Acts 19:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

Commented [notes4]: Revelation 1:11 (ESV)

¹¹ saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.

Commented [notes5]: Revelation 19:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.

Commented [notes6]: Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)

¹² For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Commented [notes7]: Hebrews 4:13 (ESV)

¹³ And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

healing touch of that god. Several Christian stone masons were martyred for refusing to cut images of snakes for the temple.

Others believe it was the altar to Zeus at the top of the acropolis. Edwin Yamauchi describes it as follows: "The word *altar* is somewhat misleading. The structure is a monumental colonnaded court in the form of a horseshoe, 120 by 112 feet. The podium of the altar was nearly 18 feet high. The great frieze, which ran at the base of the structure for 446 feet, depicted a gigantomachy, that is, a battle of the gods and the giants. It was one of the greatest works of Hellenistic art." (*New Testament Cities in Western Asia Minor* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 35-36) We don't need to know which it was. The important thing was that it was a city where it was difficult to be a Christian.

Jesus said that in the face of that they held fast to His name. We increasingly see the same kind of resistance to the name of Jesus in our culture. His name divides. (John 7:43) Some want to claim Him but change His biblical identity, changing Him into a god of their own design. **Hold fast to His name! His name is the sum of His attributes**, and His attributes shine through these letters. He is uncompromising with evil. (Psalm 119:104)

Even when one in their midst was martyred, they refused to deny their faith in Jesus. Once every year in Roman cities, all citizens were required to sacrifice to the emperor. That was a dangerous time for followers of Jesus. In Pergamum that could happen any day of the year.

We can't be sure of the facts surrounding Antipas' death. The only thing we have was written around 1000 A.D. by the Eastern Orthodox Church. It said that Antipas was roasted alive in a bronze bull during the persecution by the emperor Domitian. Jesus called Antipas His faithful witness. What an honor, as that was the title Jesus used for Himself in 1:5!

Imagine the intimidation that the church felt in that city. See the glowing hot bronze bull, Roman soldiers dressed for battle, and hear the order by the governor, "Sacrifice to Domitian as Lord or be thrown into the bull!" Antipas was probably one of the elders and chosen as an example to others. The church must have watched and prayed asking God for a merciful and quick death for Antipas. Still they did not budge. They held fast to the faith of Jesus as Lord of all. After witnessing that, would we do the same?

It is fascinating to see how persecution wins the genuine seeker to the Lord. They see the example of total conviction even unto death. It strengthens the believers and convicts those who are half-hearted. I'm not saying that it is easy or that there are not fears that must be dealt with. However, it certainly does not have the effect that one would imagine in the natural ways of man. When fear of a torturous death was not sufficient to move the believers, the rulers must have backed off on the demand, for no other martyr is mentioned with Antipas. Paul had something to say about this kind of

Commented [notes8]: John 7:43 (ESV)

⁴³ So there was a division among the people over him.

Commented [notes9]: Psalm 119:104 (ESV)

¹⁰⁴ Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.

Commented [notes10]: Revelation 1:5 (ESV)

⁵ and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood

bold witness. ²⁸ *and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.* Philippians 1:28 (ESV)

But all is not well in the church of Pergamum. ¹⁴ *But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.* We went over teaching of Balaam in the sermon of the first letter, the one to the Ephesians. Some of you asked where you could find that in Scripture. It is really a combination of passages. Numbers 25 tells of the Midianite women and the sexual seduction to draw the men of Israel to worship other gods. Numbers 31:16 tells us that it was on the advice of Balaam. He couldn't prophesy against them, so he earned his fee from King Balak by suggesting a way to get them to compromise and thereby turn the Lord against them. It worked in a sense, as 24,000 did die by a plague (Numbers 25:9).

The early church had the same temptations because of several factors in the culture around them. For the most part, meat could only be obtained after it was sacrificed to an idol. The temples would have great feasts after the sacrifices. The problem for Christians was that the worship involved temple prostitutes. Most of those in the church of Pergamum held to the Jerusalem council's decision to abstain from eating meat sacrificed to idols. (Acts 15:20) The temptations involved were just too dangerous. Even if you could keep yourself above it all, it may stumble a weaker brother who could not resist. (Romans 14:15) **The best way to deal with temptation is to stay away from it.** But some in the church taught that they had the freedom to not only eat the meat but to also participate in the temple practices.

We don't know their reasoning behind this compromise, but it is enough to know we can justify any sin in our mind. It may make no sense at all, but if we want to do something, we can talk ourselves into it being alright, at least for us. I'd suggest this general rule to go by. If you need to hide something from others, it may not be sin, but why take the chance? The disciples lived with Jesus day in and day out and saw all of His life in every situation. A godly person will desire to live such an open example. (1Corinthians 10:32)

¹⁵ *So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* This teaching was similar to Balaam's suggestion. They took Christian liberty and the freedom from the Law to teach that you could do whatever you like with your body as long as your spirit belonged to Jesus. (Romans 6:1-2) In this strong church that stood in the face of death threats, there was a faction that compromised with the world, which may have also helped them avoid persecution. It blurred the idea of what it meant to be a Christian. But the real problem was that the church tolerated it.

Commented [notes11]: Numbers 31:16 (ESV)

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

Commented [notes12]: Numbers 25:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ Nevertheless, those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand.

¹⁰ And the LORD said to Moses,

Commented [notes13]: Acts 15:20 (ESV)

²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

Commented [notes14]: Romans 14:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.

Commented [notes15]: 1 Corinthians 10:32 (ESV)

³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,

I want to be very careful to distinguish the responsibility of the church. If something is generally known to all the church, then there must be discipline by the church. To tolerate sinful activity is to sanction it. We must especially confront false teaching that would encourage compromise in our Christian testimony. On the other hand, we must avoid the temptation to gossip and speculate. It isn't our job to go nosing around into other's affairs and make assumptions. We almost had a family leave because of suggestions that were unfounded, purely in the minds of busy bodies. (1Thessalonians 5:13)

The blatant incest in Corinth was known by the whole church and tolerated. (1Corinthians 5:1-2) The teaching of the Nicolaitans was not something one guy was dabbling in. It was a faction of false teaching in the church causing some to compromise with evil. No matter how loving and gentle we are, we can't tolerate that. Neither should we do as some would like and gather around our weak and wounded and shoot them. (Galatians 6:1) Everything must be done in love, with understanding, and with an effort to restore.

If someone confides in you about a sin in their life, don't bring it to me unless a life is in danger. That person has trusted you to give them advice and pray for them. (Proverbs 11:13) If they don't receive your godly instruction, the Great Shepherd will deal with them. Your elders are not going to hunt for sin in your life. Of course we want you to live lives of holiness, but it is the Holy Spirit's job to convict of sin. (John 16:7-9) We will address any issue tolerated by a faction in the church or sin that is blatant and known to all.

16 Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. This is written for the whole church. They held on to their faith in Jesus and did not deny His name, but they tolerated sinful compromise. Jesus is not going to only war against those who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans but the church as a whole for allowing the false teaching to continue. They needed to turn around their thinking on tolerating this compromise. Tolerance is the attribute our society lauds today, but it is often tolerating evil. Jesus says He will personally fight against the church that tolerates evil with the sword of His mouth!

It has been asked, "Where is the line that must be drawn as to what we confront as false teaching and what we tolerate as a difference of opinion." There is not an easy answer. Of course what is obviously sinful doctrine or what denies who Christ is and what He has done for us must be confronted. The council in Jerusalem had already told them not to compromise in eating food offered to idols and sexual sin. Defiance of church authority must also be confronted so that factions are not formed in the church. (Hebrews 13:17) Peter and Jude laid out pretty clearly the marks of false teachers, sensuality, greed, and pride. (Jude 10-11; 2Peter 2:14) They are the same today.

Commented [notes16]: 1 Thessalonians 5:13 (ESV)

¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Commented [notes17]: 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 (ESV)

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Commented [notes18]: Galatians 6:1 (ESV)

¹ Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

Commented [notes19]: Proverbs 11:13 (ESV)

¹³ Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.

Commented [notes20]: John 16:7-9 (ESV)

⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:

⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me;

Commented [notes21]: Hebrews 13:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Commented [notes22]: Jude 1:10-11 (ESV)

¹⁰ But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively.

¹¹ Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion.

Commented [notes23]: 2 Peter 2:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!

¹⁷ *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* This is for all whom God has enabled to hear His encouragement and warnings. At the end of each letter we must ask if we are willing to hear what Jesus personally dictated to us, His body, the church. (Ephesians 5:23)

*To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.*⁴ The conqueror or overcomer is the one who will hear and obey what the Spirit says.

John wrote in his letter, ⁴ *For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world -our faith.* ⁵ *Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?* 1John 5:4-5 (ESV) If you are born of God, if you believe and receive Jesus as the Son of God, you will overcome. You will endure. Jesus reward for a life surrendered to His lordship is Himself. He is the hidden manna. He is the bread that came down from heaven. (John 6:48-51) There could be no greater reward.

When I first taught on this church here at Wayside about a decade ago, I came home one day to find a small white stone on a table in the middle of my bedroom. My wife didn't know where it came from. We never did figure it out. It was pretty weird because I had been wondering about the significance of this phrase.

John MacArthur explains that victors of the athletic games were sometimes given a small white stone with their name engraved on it. It was their ticket to an awards celebration.¹ Fellow victors in Christ Jesus, our award celebration is our marriage feast with the King of kings. (19:9) The victory is ours in Christ Jesus who won the victory for us. (1Corinthians 15:57)

I don't know the significance of the new name, but we see something similar in the Old Testament at important turning points in the lives of the patriarchs Abram and Jacob. (Genesis 17:5; 32:28) Their new name spoke of the destiny God had planned for them. The word for "new" in this case, *kainos*, is not just new in time, but new in nature. We aren't getting just a different name, but a name that is of the new creation. If only you and Jesus know it, it will be a name of intimacy with Jesus. I imagine it to be the essence of who He made you to be in Him.

I pray that we have an ear to hear the encouragement, the warning, and the promises to the church of Pergamum.

Questions

- 1 Describe Pergamum.
- 2 What would the intro of the sword bring to mind?

Commented [notes24]: John 6:48-51 (ESV)

⁴⁸ I am the bread of life.

⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.

⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Commented [notes25]: MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Revelation 2

Commented [notes26]: Revelation 19:9 (ESV)

⁹ And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."

Commented [notes27]: 1 Corinthians 15:57 (ESV)

⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Commented [notes28]: Genesis 17:5 (ESV)

⁵ No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

Commented [notes29]: Genesis 32:28 (ESV)

²⁸ Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

- 3 What might Satan's throne mean?
- 4 What were they commended for doing?
- 5 Who was Antipas?
- 6 What were they rebuked for doing?
- 7 What was the core of the false doctrine?
- 8 What is false teaching?
- 9 Who conquers and how?
- 10 What do they receive?
- 11 Do you have an ear to hear?