

Pergamos: The Lax Church

Text: Revelation 2:12-17

Introduction:

1. Pergamos faced two significant threats. There was the threat without with the persecution coming from the Roman Empire but there was also the threat from within with false doctrine making inroads. This letter makes it clear that Pergamos was in far greater danger from the threat within than the threat from without.
2. The word 'Pergamos' means 'married' and describes a church that is wedded to the world.
3. We will study Christ's letter to Pergamos under 5 headings

I. The Revelation of Christ (Vs. 12)

A. The Audience (Vs. 12a)

1. Pergamos located about 90 miles north of Smyrna (144 kms) and 15 miles (24kms) inland on the river Caicus. It was an important trade center since it was located at a major crossroad in Western Asia.
2. In John's day the city had been built around the foot of the hill and the city's acropolis (high fortified city) was located on the summit.
3. Pergamos was a city with impressive architecture. It had a massive theatre with a seating capacity of 10,000 and a 200,000-volume library that rivalled the ancient library of Alexandria, Egypt.
4. The making of books on parchment (prepared animal skins) was invented in Pergamos, the word "parchment" being derived from the name of the city. (Cloud)

B. The Author (Vs. 12b)

1. Christ reveals Himself as the one with the sharp, two-edged sword proceeding out of His mouth (see Rev. 1:16).
2. This is a picture of the Word of God (Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12). Christ Himself is called "the Word" (John 1) Rev. 19:13 *"And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God."*

II. The Commendation of Christ (Vs. 13)

Christ knew...

A. The Situation of the Church (Vs. 13a)

1. "thou dwellest" = to settle down, to live, "to dwell permanently". It was God's will for these folks to be a light in this difficult place.

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2. "Satan's seat" = the word seat is from the Greek word 'throne'. Pergamos was a dark, Satanic stronghold. The devil was at home in this place and had a firm grip on it through its evil idolatry.
3. There were many temples and shrines dedicated to the worship of idols. For example:
 - a. There was the great altar of Zeus which was 40 feet (13m) in height and famous as one of the wonders of the world at that time.
 - b. There were three temples in Pergamos dedicated to Emperor worship. In fact, it was the center of Emperor worship in the Roman province of Asia. Whereas in other cities, burning incense to Caesar was more often an annual event, in Pergamos it was a daily occurrence.
 - c. Probably the most popular was the temple of Asklepios, the supposed god of healing worshiped in the form of a serpent which attracted people from all over the world. The cities coins depicted a rod encircled by a serpent; a symbol still used by the medical practice today. "The sick flocked to this temple seeking cures, believing that while they slept in the court of the temple the serpent god would reveal the remedy to the priests and physicians by means of dreams. If they were touched by any of the snakes that were kept in the temple, they believed that they had been touched by the god." (Cloud) The serpent is a symbol of the devil in the Bible (Gen 3; 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 20:2).

B. The Steadfastness of the Church (Vs. 13b)

Despite the Satanic oppressiveness and evil, this church is commended by Christ for its faithfulness in two areas:

1. They were faithful to the Person of Christ – "holdest fast my name" This church refused to say 'Kurios Kaisar' and continued to say 'Kurios Iesous'. (RWP). They remained steadfast in their loyalty and allegiance to Christ's name. This was significant in a day when the Roman Emperor Domitian was proclaiming himself as "Lord and God."
2. They were faithful to the Precepts of Christ – "my faith" They were loyal to the truth of God's Word, the body of doctrine described here as the 'faith' belonging to Christ. Jesus Christ is truth personified, the truth incarnate (John 14:6; 18:37). The truth is His possession and no one has the authority to alter it!

C. The Suffering of the Church (Vs. 13c)

1. "even in those days" = the church had remained steadfast in spite of going through the pain of Antipas' martyrdom.
2. Nothing else is recorded about Antipas but tradition claims he was roasted alive inside an iron bull. Whoever he was, he is described by Christ as "my faithful martyr".

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3. This church was holding up against the roar of the lion from without but it was in grave danger of being destroyed by the angel of light from within! The real danger was not the persecution from without but the perversion from within! When Satan can't defeat the church by attacking it openly from without, he switches from confrontation to infiltration. He switches to covert operations, special ops and espionage.

III. The Condemnation from Christ (Vs. 14-15)

Even though this was a suffering church, Christ did not hold back from rebuking it for its error. Christ condemns...

A. The Heresy of the Minority (Vs. 14b & 15b)

1. The doctrine of Balaam
 - a. Balaam mentioned three times in the N.T. We have reference to "the way of Balaam" (2 Peter 2:15), the "error of Balaam" (Jude 1:11) and the "doctrine of Balaam" (Rev. 2:14).
 - b. Read Numbers 22-25 for the history concerning Balaam. Balac, king of Moab, hired Balaam to come and curse Israel but God turned his curse into a blessing. Since Balaam could not defeat Israel by cursing them, he counseled Balac to defeat them through idolatrous corruption. Numbers 25 records the sad story of how the men of Israel were ensnared by the women of Moab. Twenty four thousand people died because of their compromise.
 - c. Num. 31:16 *"Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD."*
 - d. "stumbling block" = a 'skandalon'. "It is a trap or more precisely that part of a trap where the bait is placed which, when touched, triggers the trap to close on its prey...Metaphorically the word referred to anything over which a person might fall or stumble into sin." (Thomas)
 - e. Swete: "The women of Moab were deliberately thrown in the way of unsuspecting people of Israel for the purpose of causing their downfall."
 - f. In summary, the doctrine of Balaam is the teaching that God's people are at liberty to commit sin. "The doctrine of Balaam suggests simply that the wicked practices of the world are not really sinful." (Phillips)
 - g. Pergamos means 'married'. This church was forgetting its engagement to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2) and was kissing the lips of the world in an adulterous union.

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- h. Challenge: The doctrine of Balaam is alive and well today with those who teach a perverted view of God's grace. You see it in the rock and roll churches, with their loose morals, social drinking, dancing, immodesty, sensuality, immorality and love for the world. See Titus 2:11-12 and Romans 6:14-15 to be reminded of how the true grace of God will lead us to live.
 - i. Horatius Bonar: "I looked for the church I found it in the world, I looked for the world I found it in the church."
2. The doctrine of the Nicolaitans
- a. "them that hold" = the word 'hold' from the same word translated "hold fast" in Vs. 13. While most of the church was holding fast to the truth, there were others who were holding fast to false doctrine.
 - b. Possibly a gnostic sect that taught a similar view to the Balaamites but likely a sect that corrupted pastoral authority that eventually lead to the Roman Catholic hierarchy.
 - c. "which thing I hate" = what this group taught is not clearly revealed but what is revealed is Christ's view of this heretical group. He hated their 'deeds' (Vs. 6) and their 'doctrine' (Vs. 15). The key principle is that Christ takes no light view of error. It is **NOT** Christlike to tolerate false doctrine.
 - d. David Cloud: "The most important lesson from Christ's mention of the Nicolaitans is that every doctrine and practice that is contrary to the New Testament is to be exposed and rejected by the churches."

B. The Leniency of the Majority (Vs. 14a & 15a)

- 1. The primary rebuke goes to the church as a whole for harboring these heretics and for having a light view of them. The church is rebuked for its inaction and indifference to these errors. It is true that the majority of the church's members still held fast to Christ's Person and Precepts but that was not enough. It is NOT enough to simply hold to the right doctrine. We are called upon to actively "contend for the faith" and that means disciplining out of the church those who hold unscriptural doctrines.
- 2. Thomas: "The fault of the church as a whole was not adherence to the teaching or doctrine of Balaam, but rather indifference to those within who were in sympathy with it."
- 3. 1 Timothy 1:3 *"As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that **they teach no other doctrine,**"*
- 4. Titus 3:10-11 *"A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself."*

IV. The Exhortation of Christ (Vs. 16)

A. Repent (Vs. 16a)

1. The order is given in a sharp, staccato manner, like a military command. This is the first step towards spiritual restoration and requires much humility. It's a change of mind and attitude that results in a change of action.
2. The church as a whole is called upon to repent of its attitude of toleration towards false doctrine and false teachers. They had allowed the error to persist unchecked in the church and had not brought Scriptural discipline to bear like the church of Ephesus (Vs. 2).
3. What a contrast to the day in which we live. In this era, we are told, "Let us drown our doctrinal differences in the ocean of brotherly love. It does not matter what you believe, lets hold hands, and build bridges." (Lyle)

B. Regard (Vs. 16b)

1. "or else" = Christ adds a solemn warning to further impress upon them the urgency and necessity that they heed His call to repentance. Christ would bring severe chastisement upon this church if it failed to repent. Failure to repent from sin and error has serious consequences. For the lost sinner, it means hell for eternity. For the saint, it means chastening and loss of rewards at the Bema seat.
2. "I will come unto thee quickly" = Christ would personally deal with His candlestick
3. "and will fight against them" = the idea is to wage war. The choice was simply, either the church wield the sword of truth and deal with the error, or Christ would deal with it, and the whole church in the process.
4. Matthew Henry: "When God comes to punish the corrupt members of a church, he rebukes that church itself for allowing such to continue in its communion, and some drops of the storm fall upon the whole society."

V. The Invitation of Christ (Vs. 17)

A. The Plea (Vs. 11a)

1. To the individual – "he that hath an ear"
2. To the church – "what the Spirit saith unto the churches" What is the main message of Christ through this letter? Deal with error and stand for the truth!

B. The Promise (Vs. 11b)

1. The overcomer

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- a. The word 'overcometh' is in the present tense. It speaks of the life of victory the saved individual experiences.
 - b. It is a description of every genuine believer. 1 John 5:4-5 "*For whatsoever is **born of God** overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but **he that believeth** that Jesus is the Son of God?*"
2. The outcome
- a. A special sustenance – “the hidden manna”
 - i. Speaks of Christ - John 6:48 “I am that bread of life.”
 - ii. The overcomer has the blessing of feeding on Christ in both this life and the next.
 - b. A special stone – “a white stone”
 - i. Speaks of the special, personal relationship Christ has with each of His children.
 - ii. The stone is ‘white’ which is a picture of holiness; the holiness of Christ and the imputed holiness of the believer. (Cloud)
 - iii. “White stones were often given in the first century as a symbol of appreciation and acceptance, or specifically as a means of admission to a special event. Christ promises all true believers that in overcoming, they will be rewarded with eternal acceptance and admission into His presence.” (Lyle).

Conclusion:

1. What is your attitude towards truth? Are you tolerant of error?
2. Are you an overcomer? Have you been born again? If so, there will be some evidence in your life – “*If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;*” (John 8:31)