

Introduction

This week I was thinking about churches which find themselves in hard places. With so many churches compromising on crucial doctrinal and ethical matters in our day, I decided to check on a random church in what I figure to be a hard place to see if I could find one that appears to be remaining faithful. So I typed into google search, "First Baptist Church San Francisco." I was encouraged to discover a church whose online witness is one of fidelity to Christ, the Bible and the gospel. This morning we are turning to a letter from Jesus to another church in a very hard place. In fact we might say the church was located in the headquarters of hell—the church in the ancient city of Pergamum.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main point of Jesus's letter to the church in Pergamum is to warn that even if the church withstands persecution from the outside, it must also be zealous for truth and holiness on the inside. It is not enough to rest on our laurels for a good performance in one area. We certainly must not content ourselves for only how we deal with external influences but also with those insidious seductive pressure which arise from within. As we break down the letter, I want you to see four facets of the church in Pergamum.

I. The Place They Lived

A. As he does with each of the seven churches, Jesus declares to the church in Pergamum an outstanding feature about them that "He Knows." To Ephesus, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, he says, "I know your works." To Smyrna he says, "I know your tribulation." And here, to Pergamum, he says, "I know . . . WHERE YOU LIVE."

Each of these cities in which God had sovereignly established churches was known for something. As with the other cities, Pergamum was filled with idolatry. But Pergamum stands out among the rest for its political position in Asia Minor. It was the strongest base of Roman authority outside Rome itself. What Madison is to Wisconsin, Pergamum was to Asia Minor. It was the center of Roman governmental authority in the region. Pergamum possessed the authority to carry out capital punishment. It possessed what was called the "right of the sword." Under the providence of God, governments do bear the sword. They have the God-given authority to judge and to punish wrongdoers. So the emblem of the sword becomes meaningful for grasping the significance of Jesus' message to this church.

We speak of the "Imperial Cult" to refer to a state religion in which emperors are worshiped as gods. The Imperial Cult thrived in Smyrna, where Caesar was proclaimed to be Lord. And yet, as Pergamum was the governmental center of power, the Imperial Cult was EVEN MORE dominating there. Anyone who would not acknowledge Caesar's lordship was in deep trouble in Pergamum. Other worship was woven into the Pergamum culture as well. The worship of Zeus was prominent. In fact an enormous altar to Zeus had been constructed in the design of a massive throne. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the smoke of animal sacrifices ascended into the air from this throne. The god of healing, known as Aesculapius, also had a temple in Pergamum. This god was worshiped in the figure of a serpent. Non-venomous snakes were allowed to slither freely through his temple. Those seeking a cure of disease would come to the temple and make offerings and spend the night on the temple floor in hopes of being healed by the touch of one of the serpents.

B. Between the authority of Rome, the worship of Zeus from a throne, and the prevalence of the figure of the serpent in Pergamum, it is easy to see why Jesus would designate the city of Pergamum as the place where Satan's throne is and as the place where Satan dwells. And yet right here in the headquarters of hell, God had planted a church. The gospel was preached and persons were born again. They saw the wretchedness of themselves and their sin and turned from sin and trusted in Christ's wonderful wrath-satisfying death and resurrection. Those who thus were converted were joined together as a body. They were the church in Pergamum.

C. And God wanted a church in hell's headquarters. It was a ripe mission field and a place in which Christ's followers would shine as lights and be a witness of God's mercy and grace and righteousness. So we notice that of all the things Jesus might have said to this church, one thing he did not say was that they should get away. He did not say, "I know where you live, where Satan's throne is. What are you doing there? Get away. You can live much more comfortably in Laodicea; it is much more tolerant of Christians. You need to get out of town and into the wilderness." Jesus said nothing like any of these things.

The omission of comments like those make sense when we think of how Jesus prayed for his people. Back in John 17, Jesus prayed for his followers this way: "I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I DO NOT ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." You know, when Jesus came into this world, he was not looking to locate in one of the world's ten best cities to retire or one of the world's ten best cities to raise a family or one of the world's ten safest cities. He came to a broken and darkened world. And he came to die. And Jesus, when he sends out his disciples, is not concerned chiefly with our comfort and safety and that we live among a people who share his moral values. Rather, he is concerned with our sanctification and the mission to which we have been called. Jesus does not want us to get out of the world. He has sent us into the world. Some he appoints to dwell even where Satan's throne is. Our goal must not be to find the safest, most morally comfortable place to pursue worldly dreams. Our goal must be to exhibit Christ and the gospel wherever in God's providence he places us, even if it is in the headquarters of hell.

II. The Persecution They Endured

When you are faithful in the world, there will be hatred. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. But if you live faithfully for Jesus, the world will not be kind. Pergamum had been extremely unkind to Christ's followers. The very nature of the city challenged their faith. It is clear that the Christians were under extreme pressure to disown Christ. The city bore the right of the sword and they used it against the followers of Christ. But the Pergamum church had remained faithful. Jesus makes the point of commending the Pergamum church for NOT denying his faith even when the hostility was its most intense, when Pergamum killed Christ's faithful witness, Antipas. Even when the persecution turned deadly, they would not deny the Lord.

Simon Peter himself had denied Christ three times while Jesus was standing trial. But in its worst hour of testing, the Pergamum church had not. They were more attached to Christ than they were to life itself. Their living testimony expressed what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians about himself. Citing all of his fleshly advantages, Paul made this strong declaration, ". . . whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." He continued, "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." Paul

renounced everything the world has to offer because knowing Christ, even suffering with Christ, was worth far more.

Antipas and the Pergamum church are an inspiring example. They remained faithful in the face of death. They did not run and they did not deny the Lord. They embraced the suffering of belonging to Christ. Do we? Brothers and sisters, we do not live in Pergamum. But our setting is more like Pergamum than it used to be. And it is becoming even more like Pergamum with every passing day. It is not a happy thought, but it is reality. As the darkness becomes darker, let us refuse to dim the light. Let us refuse to deny Christ even if it costs us our job, our standing, our reputation, our family, or even our life. Whatever the cost, it cannot compare with the worth of knowing Christ.

III. The Problem They Ignored

A. The Pergamum church had been faithful in the face of the world's frontal assault on its faith. It had resisted in the face of the attacks that came from the outside. But the devil is quite deceptive. He does not limit his attacks on Christ's church to direct frontal assault. He also looks for ways in the back door. In Pergamum while bringing a frontal assault, he had also dispatched a platoon to infiltrate the church and foment disloyalty to Christ from the inside. While Jesus commends the Pergamum church for the way it has dealt with the frontal assault, he indicates that not all was well in this church. They had been negligent when it came to addressing faithlessness on the inside. And their neglect was a **SERIOUS** concern to Jesus. He says, "I have a few things against you" and if you do not repent, "I will come to you soon" and "make war . . . with the sword of my mouth."

B. Before we consider the nature of the failure at Pergamum, let's focus on Jesus and on his sword. He identified himself at the outset of this letter as the one "who has the sharp two-edged sword." It was a reference back to the vision John had seen in which Jesus appeared as holy judge. From his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword and his face was shining like the sun in full strength. As I mentioned earlier, Pergamum was the seat of Roman authority in the region. The city bore "the right of the sword," representing authority and the right to judge the guilty. However, in this letter Jesus depicts HIMSELF as the one with the ultimate authority of the sword.

On the surface of things Pergamum bore the sword, but Pergamum itself could not escape the sword of Christ. This city will be called to account. The judgment it has handed out will be put under Christ's own scrutiny. In the world those who bear the sword of governmental authority ultimately will answer to the one who bears the sword of universal authority. It is a comfort to us to know that the injustice that is often meted out by leaders and rulers of this world will not forever go unchecked. In the end justice will be brought to bear through Christ. When you look to the return of Christ depicted in Revelation 19, he comes with a sharp sword with which to smite the nations. The only way to escape the judgment of Christ in that day when he comes to tread the wine press of the wrath of God the Almighty is to be found in Christ—not having a righteousness of your own but that which comes by faith in Christ.

And yet the main focus of the sword-bearing Christ in this letter here to the church in Pergamum is not the world. It is not the wicked city in which this church dwells. Rather Jesus presents himself and his sword as an image of warning to the church. The sword-bearing Christ is about to come to Pergamum to visit the church because of its failure. Facing the sword of the citizens of Pergamum would be one thing, but to face the sword of Jesus would be another. This is a sober warning from Christ demonstrating his zeal for the purity of his church. Think of how Jesus entered the temple in Jerusalem and drove out the money changers who were adulterating the worship and purposes of God. Zeal for his Father's house consumed him. Do not think that Jesus takes any less lightly what

goes on in his churches. The Lord who saves us, the Lord who has assembled us is jealous for the purposes for which he has brought us together, and we need to be as well.

C. Now, what was the problem in Pergamum? Jesus makes the charge: "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. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans."

Little is known about the Nicolaitans but what we can surmise from this text. But we do know about the teaching of Balaam. Remember him from the Old Testament? As the Israelites journeyed toward the promised land, the king of the Moabites, Balak, became afraid they would destroy him and his people, so he hired Balaam to prophesy against the Israelites. But God opposed Balaam and would not allow him to speak against his people. So Balaam counseled Balak to get in through the back door. Instead of fighting directly against the people, seek to draw them away from God by seduction. Appeal to their fleshly lusts with your women and draw them away to worship your gods, and God himself will destroy the Israelites for their unfaithfulness to him. Balak took the advice of Balaam. And the results were catastrophic for the Israelites. The Israelite men went after the Moabite women and then they went after the Moabite idols. In the end God destroyed 24,000 Israelite men.

Pergamum, waterlogged as it was with idolatry, was a hard place to live. Nearly every aspect of life involved a connection to the worship of pagan deities. If you were in a trade, that trade had a guild, and each guild had its own god. The guilds would meet regularly to worship their gods and consume food offered to those gods. Then they would engage in sexual immorality in order to seek the favor of that god. The false teaching that came into the church was apparently advocating that one could be a disciple of Christ and at the same time involve oneself in the debauchery of idolatry. There was no discrepancy between being followers of Christ and friends of the world. The Nicolaitans may have taken a different route of reason to get there, but their destination was the same. You can have Christ AND be of the world. This is false teaching. James directly addresses the error in chapter 4 of his epistle: "You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." Christ's prayer to the Father was that we would not be taken out of the world but that we would not be like the world—that we would be sanctified. Christ died to produce a people zealous for holiness. The false teaching in Pergamum was a seduction to worldliness and ungodliness. Teaching that tolerates the idea that one can follow Christ and live for the world is Satan's backdoor strategy to draw people away from God. If anyone is in Christ old things are gone; behold new things have come, including a heart that pursues holiness not that condones unrighteousness.

So here is the situation. False teachers had emerged within the church. What they were teaching was reprehensible to Christ. Jesus had mentioned to the church at Ephesus how he HATED the works of the Nicolaitans. The church at Pergamum was not giving up Christ's name, but neither were they exercising hatred for this false teaching. It is not as though the whole church had embraced the false teaching. Jesus is clear. "You have SOME there who hold the teaching of Balaam;" and "you have SOME who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans." The problem in the church was that they were nonchalant about the false teaching. They tolerated it. It was no big deal. Now, while Jesus would clearly be at odds with the ones who were holding to the false teaching, they are not his church. His concern is with the toleration the church was exercising toward the teaching. The tolerant church is who he tells to repent. They would need to exercise discipline on the false teachers and those who held to it. They would need to take a firm stand on the truth and expose

and denounce the error in their midst. They would need to put out from them those who persisted in the error.

Jesus is absolutely serious about this. He tells the church to repent or he will come soon and war against the scoundrels with the sword of his mouth. In other words, Jesus is telling the church to take care of the matter like they should or he will. With the reference to Balaam we should recall at this point the instance when Balaam was on his way to meet the princes of Moab in order to try and curse the Israelites. On his donkey on the way, the angel of the Lord, Jesus himself, stands in the way with a drawn sword on the verge of killing him. He confronts Balaam for his perverse way. In this way is Jesus now confronting this church and those who hold to deadly heresy in her. We cannot afford to be nonchalant about doctrine! Errors, especially those which lead to ungodliness and idolatry, are abominable to Christ and they must be to us. We cannot afford to be lax when it comes to preserving and upholding the truth.

IV. The Promise They Received

The call to repentance comes with a promise. Says Jesus, "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."

The consequences for refusing to deal with error are grave. But the promise to those who deal with it rightly is most blessed indeed.

First, the conqueror receives some of the hidden manna. I believe this is a reference to sharing in the wedding feast of the Lamb. At the consummation of the age, the church has been made ready, the groom Christ Jesus has come to get her and take her home where we celebrate a feast forever. He will feed us manna such as we have not known before. He himself provides the riches of knowing him for all ages.

Second, Jesus promises a white stone to each one who conquers. It seems connected to the wedding feast as well. In Roman games the victors were awarded a white stone inscribed with their name. It granted them entrance to a special awards banquet. In that culture white stones in general were given as tickets of entrance to festivals and celebrations. So the white stone appears to be an assurance of admission to the wedding supper. The new name will only be known by the one who receives it. Revelation 3:12 tells us Christ has his own new name in glory. Perhaps it speaks of the deeper and unprecedented way in which we will know him once the marriage is consummated.

Conclusion

Every time we observe the Lord's Supper we anticipate the coming wedding feast of Jesus wherein we share communion with him. After observing the supper with his disciples, remember what Jesus said, "I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." It is an abiding remembrance of what Jesus has done for us by his death on the cross but also an abiding reminder of the joy that awaits all those who overcome, all those who conquer. In this case, it reminds us of the importance of actively being zealous for the true faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Prayer

Benediction

Friendship with the world is enmity with God. Let us not adulterously love the world, but count as rubbish whatever things are worldly gain so that we may be found in Christ, having his righteousness. And may we guard the truth that he not need to come to us with a sword but with a white stone and the assurance of entrance to the marriage supper of the Lamb. A-men.