

Revelation 2:12-17 Stay True to the Word

Introduction:

As Christianity becomes increasingly marginalized, what are the dangers? When the beliefs or values of Christians are ridiculed or ostracized, what are the potential pitfalls. The dangers of outward persecution are clear. Death due to mob violence or even state-sponsored executions are possible, but what are the dangers that can rise up from within?

The church in Pergamos faced just such a predicament. While Jesus warned that persecution was going to increase in Smyrna, in Pergamos it had already taken the life of one member of the church. The threats now had substance. The outward situation was precarious, but Jesus sees a greater danger for this church rising from within.

A Look at the Passage:

2:12 Pergamos Also Pergamon, Pergamum. The name of means “citadel” and the city was originally built on a high hill and later became the fortress-like capital of an ancient kingdom. When the Romans took over, the boundaries of the kingdom became more or less the boundaries of the Roman province of Asia. Pergamos became the capital of the province. Emperor worship was prominent since it was the capital, but this was supplemented by a number of other idol temples. Since 1930, the gigantic altar of Zeus has been on display at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin.

The literary atmosphere of Pergamos was possibly its most unique feature. There was a huge library of 200,000 volumes, which made it a rival to ancient Alexandria in Egypt. The Egyptians controlled the production of papyrus, so they refused to give Pergamos paper to build a rival library. As a result, the people of Pergamos perfected the art of making scrolls out of animal skins. We get our word “parchment” from the Latin *pergamena*, Pergamos. Sadly, Antony gave this entire library, which didn’t even belong to him, to Cleopatra. It was destroyed in the 7th century during the conquests of Caliph Omar.

The modern city of Bergama in present day Turkey is overshadowed by Izmir, ancient Smyrna.

Sharp two-edged sword The Roman proconsul at Pergamos possessed what was called “the right of the sword” which meant he could carry out capital punishment at will. Consider the power Pilate held in Palestine where the Jews could not execute Jesus themselves but had to turn him over to Roman authority to be crucified – a Roman punishment.

In reality, Jesus possesses the sword. It is sharp and proceeds from out of his mouth. Life and death belong to him and not the Roman rulers. Jesus speaks and it comes to pass. The two-edged sword is symbolic of his word. See **Revelation 1:16**.

Ephesians 6:17 *And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God;*

Hebrews 4:12 *For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.*

2:13 where Satan's throne is Jesus may be referring to the seat of the Roman government, but it's truly hard to say. At any rate Jesus is aware that the situation in Pergamos is hard. Wherever else in the world Satan may have been active, his headquarters was in those days at Pergamos. (And we sometimes think our situation is difficult?)

You hold fast to my name But the church in Pergamos was faithful. They did not give up on Jesus even when things were tough. Jesus is aware of all of this.

Antipas In the previous letter to Smyrna, they were told to remain faithful unto death. In Pergamos one member of the church had already lost his life. Probably this was due to mob violence rather than any special state-sponsored persecution. The latter most likely would have resulted in more than one solitary death. This was, however, a foretaste of things to come.

Where Satan dwells Jesus clearly understands the spiritual climate in Pergamos.

The spiritual climate of the surrounding culture should never deter us. The mood in America is less and less conducive to Christianity at this time – but **we need to stay true to God's Word.**

C. T. Studd, 1860-1931. English missionary to China, India, and Africa, made up a little poem:

*Some want to live within the sound
of church or chapel bell;
I want to run a rescue shop
within a yard of hell.*

The Great Commission reminds us that we have to be willing to serve Jesus anywhere. And the closer we are to "hell," the more likely we will find people who understand that they are lost. "Nice" people may be equally lost, but they may be less likely to admit it – church is a formality.

2:14 a few things against you Here is the sad part. We might hope that in such a harsh setting, near the very headquarters of Satan, this church would receive only affirmation from the Lord. Not so. The church in Pergamos was guilty of compromising some essentials of the faith.

Balaam = swallower of the people. We find his story in the book of **Numbers**, but Jesus repeats the gist of it right here. **Balak** hired him to curse the children of Israel. Knowing that any curse he might utter would be ineffective, Balaam came up with a trap. They sent in idol-worshipping women to seduce the men of Israel. They invited them to the feasts of God named Baal of Peor where they bowed down to the idol and they engaged in promiscuous sex. Eventually 24,000 of them died in a plague.

Doctrine of Balaam Here is the problem in Pergamos. The teaching of Balaam has made its way into the church. They wouldn't have called it that, but Jesus is drawing a comparison with something that happened early in biblical history. The church needs to beware of the trouble.

If a Christian falls morally, he or she may recognize the need to repent - as long as the teaching of the church remains sound. That person can turn from sin, be forgiven and go on with life.

But sometimes teaching creeps into the church that says that encourages sexual "freedom." Here they may have downplayed the dangers of idolatry, so maybe the people were taking part in some of the local pagan feasts. That would be pretty easy to do considering the whole city was given to idols and it was the seat of Roman authority. And the Greco-Roman world was notorious for being sexually "free." Christian standards and morals would have been conspicuously counter-cultural – which could lead to ridicule or accusations of arrogance.

So what happens when teaching in the church encourages sexual immorality and false (idolatrous) concepts of God? Those who fall into sin don't repent. They see their behavior as normal, as their "right," perhaps saying they are free from the law of the OT, and therefore, free to engage in all these practices.

Further, the problem is not that the church as a whole is adhering to the teaching of Balaam. Jesus indicates the number of those actually holding the "doctrine of Balaam" are limited. But the church is tolerating such teaching. They have become indifferent to the false doctrine so the followers of this deception are only likely to increase. None of them will be encouraged to repent because there is no one to oppose them.

We see this today in America. Some churches blatantly encourage behaviors that the Bible declares immoral. They say they are not being legalistic. They are free from confining traditional concepts of morality and now know better. And people in the church say things like:

"Surely love is the most important thing, and we love one another."

"We're married in God's eyes."

"We're not under the law as Christians. We don't force people to eat kosher food or men to be circumcised. What makes you so interested in our private sex lives?"

"It's a natural bodily need. It's healthy. Why stop people from being sexually fulfilled?"

And on and on it goes. These churches are enmeshed in the doctrine of Balaam. Some other churches, however, are not at the forefront of these changes in biblical ideals. They are merely sympathetic to the people and churches that are at the forefront of the call to change. These are more like the church in Pergamos. They are not leaders in the charge; they are trying to be unbiased observers. They may consider themselves more tolerant or more sophisticated.

The danger is real. Therefore, we have to see that to remain faithful to our faith, we Christians have to refuse any sexual activity outside the married relationship between a husband and wife. This is because of the sacred nature of the marital union. This is the biblical standard that has been set. This is the standard that Christ expects us to follow and what he expects us to teach.

2:15 We pointed out that **Balaam** = swallower of the people. **Nicolaitans** = conquerors of the people. Some commentators believe these were one and the same – a fringe group that advocated both idolatry and sexual immorality. Maybe so, but it seems that Jesus is making a distinction between them. He also uses a word that means “likewise” that doesn’t make it into the NKJV, so he seems to show that there is a relationship between the two. See also **2:6**.

“The best conclusion is that there were two different but similar groups in this church, both of which had disobeyed the decision of the Jerusalem council in regard to idolatrous practices and fornication.” – Robert L. Thomas

2:16 The solution is to **repent**. Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change in behavior. There has to be a turning from sin and turning to Jesus. The doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans have to be rejected by this church. Idolatry and sexual immorality have to once again be thought of as wrong. In this case, toleration is not sophistication; it is sin. The culture is going to be idolatrous and immoral on all sides. The church will not change that, but they must not allow the surrounding culture to generate compromise within the church.

And if the church doesn’t repent, then a higher authority than the Roman government is going to oppose them. He will fight against them **with the sword of [his] mouth**. He will use no weapon but his own Word. That’s why we have to **stay true to the word of God**.

2:17 **he who has an ear** This is Christ’s repeated call to all in the church who will listen.

To him who overcomes The overcomer is the person who stays faithful to Jesus regardless of the frequency or severity of his or her trials. There are daily victories to be won and future rewards to be received.

hidden manna When the people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, God satisfied their hunger with this miraculous “bread from heaven.” When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and Satan told him to change the stones into bread, he pointed back to that manna, quoting Moses who said,

Deuteronomy 8:3 *So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives **by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord**.*

Are we living by every word that proceeds to the mouth of the Lord? Ask yourself, what is your attitude toward the Scriptures? What is your actual involvement with them? **We have to stay true to the word of God**.

White stone In those days, a judge put a white stone into container to vote for an acquittal for a person on trial. Another picture from ancient times is that a special sort of white stone could be used as a “ticket” to gain entrance to a feast. Both of these pictures can apply to believers in a spiritual sense. We have been declared righteous through faith in Christ, we feast with Christ today and will one day feast with Him in glory.

New name The word Jesus uses for **new** does not mean new in contrast to old, but something that is different in nature. The overcomer will receive a name that is of superior quality – something personally given by Jesus Christ himself. It will reflect the believer’s standing in fully belonging to Christ.

Consider the security and the intimacy implied by Jesus giving this hidden manna, this white stone and this new name which only the one who receives it gets to know. These are hints of what our relationship with Jesus will be like for all eternity.

Take Away Points:

Compromise becomes a very real possibility when a church is under pressure to conform to the society around it. It is important to remain strong – to **stay true to the Word of God.**

In *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the classic by John Bunyan, Christian and Faithful come near an evil town called Vanity, home of the famous fair. Evangelist comes on the scene and warns them about the town. He prophesies that either Christian or Faithful will die in Vanity.

So the two enter Vanity and visit the fair. They manage to resist temptation, but then are ridiculed by the townspeople. Ultimately, the people of Vanity imprison Christian and Faithful for insulting their local religion. Faithful is executed and rises to heaven. Christian eventually escapes from prison and continues his journey.

1 Peter 4:3-4 ³*For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles— when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. ⁴In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.*

Bible teacher Michael Wilcock put it like this:

“Seduction, or persecution—a choice of evils which the world offers the church. For a soft-centred permissive society can be curiously hard on those who refuse to go along with it.”

Stay true to the Word of God.

CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM: A GLOBAL DEMOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT

by Todd M. Johnson, Notre Dame, November 2012

Total all martyrs A.D. 33 to 2000: 70,000,000

Martyrdom not exclusively an early Christian phenomenon: When we hear the word *martyr* associated with Christianity, we tend to think of the Roman persecution of early Christians. This is not really accurate. Martyrdom is a consistent feature of church history and occurs in every Christian tradition and confession.

The rate of martyrdom across the world throughout the ages has been a remarkably constant 0.8%. One out of every 120 Christians in the past has been martyred; so a similar future is likely.

Martyrdom situations examined: When we examine a list of martyrs down the ages, as comprehensive as is known today, some startling findings emerge. All of the 10 largest martyrdom situations occurred in the second millennium of the Christian faith. Five of them occurred in the 20th century alone. Over 20 million were martyred in Soviet prison camps and well over half of the 70 million Christian martyrs were killed in the last century.

Source: http://icl.nd.edu/assets/84231/the_demographics_of_christian_martyrdom_todd_johnson.pdf (Accessed 06/21/2013)

The death of Antipas was only the beginning, so our hearts need to be focused on eternity.

Do you want to know what eternal glory is going to be like? Do you want to know what it will be like to eat from the hidden manna and receive this white stone and be given a new name by Jesus that no one knows but you?

Then overcome. Overcome. Be an overcomer. The promises to the overcomer are many and offer us a hint of what awaits us in that day, but only the overcomer will receive them.

We may not fully understand the promises, but it is not for us to fully know them now. The understanding and the knowledge come only by experience. For now we have to be satisfied with hints and suggestions. Jesus gives us all of these to motivate us – so that we will overcome.

Revelation 2:7 ... *To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.*

Revelation 2:11 *He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.*

Revelation 2:17 *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.*

And there are more promises yet. It's OK to read ahead.

Stay true to the Word of God.