

Uncompromising Faith – Pergamum and Now

As was so common in the Roman Empire at the time (and as we heard last week concerning the people of Smyrna), religious pluralism was one of the highest virtues. They saw no reason for an exclusive faith; a faith that “picked on” or “called out” other faiths for their errors and heresies. Everybody was free to believe what they wanted to believe... unless you were a Christian. In fact, because the faithful Christians of Pergamum refused to acknowledge any god but the Holy Trinity, and because they rejected the countless other deities worshiped in their community, their neighbors saw them as a threat. They were considered ***intolerant, mean, even undesirable***. (Nowadays we would undoubtedly add the labels “racist, homophobic, transphobic, xenophobic, misogynistic, etc.) It was no wonder they were labeled ***enemies of the state***. To the people of Pergamum—***wealthy, educated, and oh-so-progressive as they were***—the Christians were a stain on Pergamum’s image that had to be blotted out and erased.

A little background on Pergamum. The city once had a library of 200,000 volumes before the books were carted off to Egypt by Marc Antony. Parchment, the finest and most long-lasting writing surface, was invented in Pergamum. On the hill against which Pergamum was built were hundreds of temples dedicated to every god imaginable. A colossal altar to Zeus, chief of all the Greek gods, was carved from the mountain’s solid rock. There were temples to Athena, Dionysus, and even Asclepius, the god of medicine. Of course, no truly Roman city would be complete without temples to the divine emperor Augustus and the goddess Rome, the focus of worship being the government. There was even a monument to “the unknown god,” should one god perhaps have been left out. How inclusive!

As “religious” as the citizens of Pergamum clearly were, they found it deeply offensive/hateful that the Christians did not join them in their worship festivals or invite them to theirs; i.e., Holy Communion. The Christian (Scriptural) doctrine that ***only*** baptized believers in Christ have a home in His kingdom and a place at His table was ***condemned as rude and hateful***. The Christians were considered to be judgmental and intolerant because they did not condone heresies and lies. They didn’t participate in the immoral rites of the numerous pagan temples. The Christians didn’t associate with such evil, and that made their neighbors angry.

In fact, they were *more* than angry. They were ***enraged*** to the point of murder as they opposed all for which the Christians faithfully stood. That is why our Lord says to these faithful ones: “*I know where you live—where Satan has his throne*” (Revelation 2:13). With every god ***but Christ*** exalted in Pergamum, it was no wonder that their suffering intensified. In fact, many of them watched helplessly as their dear brother in the faith, Antipas, was put to death ***simply***

because he refused to recognize all the gods as being equally divine with Jesus. But... although his martyrdom terrified them beyond words, they remained faithful.

However... this doesn't mean they still didn't have some sinful issues of their own; sinful issues their Lord loved them enough to chastise them over. These Christians had a more subtle, and far more dangerous enemy, one not from outside the congregation at Pergamum, but from *within* the church. Some of these same "Christians" claimed you could be faithful to Christ while still adopting/practicing the values and way of life practiced by the pagans. These weren't false Christians far off in some other whacked-out denomination. These false Christians were in their midst, worshiping with them, *"and so far you have tolerated them."* My... how things have changed, right? *"I have a few things against you,"* says the Lord Jesus, *"you have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality"* (Revelation 2:14).

Do you remember the story of Balaam? We know the story of Balaam and his talking donkey, but do you know the bigger story? Balaam was hired by Balak, the king of Moab (enemy of Israel and God), to curse the Israelites who were on their way from the desert to the Promised Land. No one had been able to stop them. The Amorites had fallen before them, and Moab was next in line. *"I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me,"* King Balak had pleaded with Balaam, *a renowned pagan prophet.* (Balaam wasn't an Israelite! See Numbers 22ff.)

But no matter how hard he tried, Balaam could not curse the Israelites. It's not that he had a soft heart for Israel. He simply wasn't able to do it. Every time he tried, he failed. All he could do was utter blessing upon blessing for Israel, so he tried another tactic. *Balaam would get the Israelites to make spiritual and moral compromises.* If he could coax the Israelite men into the tents of the Moabite women, Israel's threat would be neutralized. *Imagine... emotions and hormones leading people away from God and His truth!* It almost worked too. The Bible says, *"The [Israelite] men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods"* (Numbers 25:1–2). The result was a plague on Israel that didn't end until the leaders of this apostasy were put to death.

Now, Balaam has been dead for centuries, but our Lord makes clear to the Christians of Pergamum that his wicked spirit still lived on in people such as the Nicolaitans. These followers of Nicolas advocated *spiritual and moral compromise* in the church at Pergamum (and in many other congregations around the Roman Empire). *Believe in Jesus, Nicolas says, but join the party too.* What could be wrong with a meal at the temple of Zeus or Athena if it promotes unity?

Why not join in the fun with the temple prostitutes? ***In fact, why not do whatever you please; whatever makes you happy?*** After all, our God is a God of grace. He forgives us in advance.

Our Lord calls on the Christians to turn a deaf ear to these poisonous words. They are nothing more than the lies of Satan. I'm reminded of the words of St. Paul, who, like Antipas, died for the faith. *"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life"* (Romans 6:1–4).

Dying to sin and living to righteousness—this is the calling of those baptized into Jesus. Enabled by the Holy Spirit through the Word of Christ, they say no to Balaam and his lies. They say no to the easy, compromising false Christianity of the Nicolaitans. They say yes to the faith of Antipas, who followed Jesus even to the point of death.

Ultimately, this double-edged sword of Jesus is no threat to the faithful Christian, ***though Christians, like all people, need to repent.*** The sword has two edges for a reason. One edge is for judgment. It proclaims the ***wrath of God*** to all who will not repent of sin and seek His mercy. This is the edge reserved for Balaam and Nicolas and their followers; for those who choose idolatry and immorality and spurn God's offer of grace and forgiveness in Jesus. It is the sharpened edge of God's Law that, ***when violated, earns His retribution.***

The other edge of the sword of Christ defends the humble sinner who comes to God in authentic repentance for mercy. This edge slays every enemy of the soul: sin, death, and the devil. ***This edge eternally protects all who hide behind it.*** It is the comforting edge of the Gospel, ***which never cuts but always heals and saves.*** May you find yourself behind the Gospel edge. *"Repent therefore!"* Jesus pleads. *"Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth"* (Revelation 2:16). ***There's one sword and two edges: One to fight for you, and one to fight against you. Which will it be?***

Jesus demonstrated His confidence in the faithful at Pergamum; that they would choose the Gospel edge. How? Because they were standing firm in faith. *"Yet you remain true to My name,"* says your Lord. *"You did not renounce your faith in Me, even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness, who was put to death in your city"* (Revelation 2:13). ***Well done! Now continue to stand firm!*** And as you do, there's a promise to you from the Holy Spirit: *"To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna"* (Revelation 2:17). This manna is God's gift to all for whom Jesus has died and who have been baptized in Him.

If you remember, in the desert during the Exodus, God's people were fed and sustained by a food that miraculously appeared each day. The desert provided nothing. They had nothing, and yet for all the years in their desert wanderings, ***God provided. Manna was always available.*** But once in the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, manna was no longer needed, and it disappeared.

So it was for those faithful Christians in Pergamum, living in a hostile city surrounded by the enemies of Jesus. ***So it is for you today.*** Heavenly manna graces your table each time you come to the Lord's Supper in the midst of this wilderness we call "life." Jesus Himself is present, miraculously providing the manna of Life that is His own living flesh to you, to strengthen you, sustain you, and defend you. One day, whenever it may be, when our Lord calls you out of the vale of tears and home to heaven, the Holy Meal of His body and blood will no longer be necessary because you will see your Lord face-to-face and join Him at the eternal feast in heaven.

How can you be sure of this future reality? ***Because of the white stone of innocence.*** "To him who overcomes I will also give . . . a white stone with a new name written on it" (Revelation 2:17). All the acquitted; i.e., all those who are declared not guilty because of Christ (justified), possess this white stone in/through faith. The divine Judge has heard all the charges against you. He knows your "rap sheet of sin." He knows what's written in the book concerning you and your sin. He's also seen the cruciform wounds on the body of Jesus, His arms outstretched, pleading for you. He has seen the garments of Christ's righteousness covering you in Baptism. ***For the sake of Christ, He has rendered His righteous verdict.*** Your Almighty God has taken out the two stones—***the black one for guilt and the white one for innocence***—and purely by His grace in/because of Christ Jesus, the white stone of acquittal has been given to you. On it is inscribed your new name, a name that declares you to be a child of God, a forgiven sinner, one who is righteous by faith. ***Forgiven He declares you, so forgiven you are, in Christ and because of Christ.*** May you, by His grace, ever and always be holding fast to and standing firm in this blessed reality and all-surpassing peace.

AMEN