

License to Sin

In the name of Him who holds the sharp two-edged sword, dear friends in Christ: Thus far in our study of the letters to the churches of Asia Minor, we've heard the Lord's positive and negative evaluations of the Christian congregations at the cities of Ephesus and Smyrna. And remember, our goal as we've been doing this is not to point fingers and judge them for their faults; but rather to look with introspection and see how the Lord's assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these churches apply also to us, that we might repent of our own failures and follow the example of what's good and proper. We saw that Jesus commended the Ephesian church for its strong stand on God's Word; but he rebuked it for its rising tendency toward being legalistic. By stressing the Law over the Gospel, they were in danger of losing the first and most important love of Christ's people. The Church at Smyrna had a different set of circumstances. They had been and were continuing to suffer from violent opposition and persecution. The Lord approved them for their steadfast witness in the face of their afflictions so far; but he warned them against their increasing fear that could undermine and destroy their faith.

Tonight we turn our attention to the Christian church at Pergamum, which was an important city about sixty miles north of Smyrna. Pergamum was the regional Roman capital; so it was home to the Roman governor of the province of Asia. The city boasted four great temples. The largest was dedicated to Zeus, the head of the Greek gods. There was another big one for Athena, the goddess of wisdom, who was also the patron protector of the city. The third temple was for Dionysos, who was the Greek god of wine and revelry (more on that in a bit). And the last you'd probably think of as more health spa than temple. It was a world-renowned shrine to Asklepios, the god of healing. People came here from all over the Mediterranean seeking cures for their ailments. And the treatments they received were part medicine, part exercise and healthy eating, part massage and soaking in mineral baths, and lots of superstition, sacrifices, and magic rituals. In addition to these four temples, and probably because Pergamum was the seat of Roman authority in the region, it was another center of the cult of emperor worship that we heard about last week; but because the local residents had less to gain by making a great show of their devotion (after all, their city was *already* favored by the Romans), they did not pursue it quite so zealously as did the people at Smyrna.

When describing the situation of the church at Pergamum, Jesus calls it the place where "Satan has his throne". What exactly he means by this is not altogether clear. The word "throne" would seem to suggest it has something to do with Satan's rule or authority. If that's true, then it may be a reference to the ruling Roman government along with the whole emperor worship thing. Certainly Satan was behind that. And this fellow Antipas who is specifically mentioned by Jesus appears to have been a regionally well-known Christian who was martyred for refusing to engage that sort of idolatry. Indeed, Jesus commends all the church at Pergamum for their faithfulness in the face of persecution. So again, it's possible that when he speaks of Satan's throne being there he means the Romans who were actively persecuting the church on behalf of Satan.

But I don't think so. Elsewhere in Scripture, human governments, regardless of how evil or corrupt they are, are called "God's servants". Paul even speaks of the Roman government that way; so it would seem a bit strange for Jesus to refer to the same outfit as "Satan's throne". Besides, the problems of Roman persecution, as bad as they were at Pergamum, were a lot worse at Smyrna.

No, at Pergamum, the main thrust of Satan's diabolic influence seems to have been along another axis. Specifically, I believe the reference to "Satan's throne" has to do with the deplorable moral conditions in the city. It was a real cesspool – a Greek version of Sodom and Gomorrah. And so it was Satan's throne in the sense that it was a city full of his temptations. If that is what is meant, then it fits very well with the specific problems mentioned in the church at Pergamum. We heard how the Lord Jesus takes them to task for harboring in their midst those who hold to the teaching of Balaam, and also those who follow the teachings of Nicolaitans. Both of these false teachings have to do with accepting deviations in God's moral law – but that probably requires some more explanation.

Balaam, you may recall, was sort of a "free-lance" prophet of God back in the days of the Exodus, when the Israelites were wondering in the wilderness with Moses before they took possession of the Promised Land. Understand that the Israelites were not the only people who believed in and worshipped the One True God. Now it happened that in their wonderings, the Israelites came to the border of the land of Moab, which was Southwest of Canaan. The king of Moab, a fellow named Balak, thought he had a real security crisis on his hands because there were some two million invaders marching all around the edges of his country. He was worried, so he offered to pay Balaam an obscene amount of money if he would place a divine curse on Israel in the name of the Lord God. Well, Balaam was torn. On one hand he was reluctant to do it because he knew that the Lord was with the Israelites, and that he would take a dim view of his cursing them. He was pretty sure it would backfire on him. On the other hand, King Balak was persistent and kept raising the already juicy offer. And the more he thought about it, the more Balaam very much wanted to have the money. In the end, he actually tried to curse Israel four different times, but whenever he opened his mouth to curse them in the name of the Lord, the only thing that would come out were blessings and positive prophecies. Naturally, King Balak, who'd hired him, was furious because that was exactly opposite of what he wanted.

So Balaam came up with another way to earn his pay. He knew that he could not curse the Israelites because the Lord would not allow it. So instead, he counseled King Balak about how he could get the Israelites to curse themselves. You see, the Moabites, like many of their neighbors in Canaan, worshipped a number of fertility gods and goddesses. And as part of all that, they engaged in cultic prostitution as a form of worship. To say it bluntly, their "worship" consisted mostly of having wild sex parties with as many partners as possible. This sort of abomination was exactly one of the reasons that the Lord had slated the Canaanites for total destruction. But clearly, such a liberal view of "worship" would have had a certain appeal to the baser side of human nature – especially for the Israelite men. Balaam told Balak to invite the Israelites over for a religious celebration, which, they'd find out when they arrived, involved the "ministry" of a few thousand temple prostitutes from Moab together with some borrowed from the surrounding nations. They'd surely entice the Israelites to join in their idol worship. And that, Balaam told Balak, would be sure to bring the Lord's curse on them. To make the story short, the plan worked. Balaam got paid, and the Lord brought a devastating plague on his people because of their sin. Twenty-four thousand of them died.

So the teaching of Balaam, that the Lord says is being taught by some in the church at Pergamum, would seem to be the same sort of idea: suggesting that it's okay for God's people to engage in ceremonies of idol worship, cultic prostitution – or perhaps any kind of sexual sins. Perhaps, also, Balaam's own sin is part of what's in mind: that of wanting to serve the Lord on one hand, but on the other, being willing to sell out in certain areas if the price is right – the desire for immediate wealth and gratification overriding true faithfulness to the Lord (same sin that destroyed the disciple Judas).

This is all very likely. Recall that there was a temple of Dionysos at Pergamum. And as I said, he was the god of wine and revelry. Got any ideas about what worship might have been like at his temple? If you guessed, “Get drunk and have sex with as many partners as possible – showing absolutely no discrimination with respect to the tender age or gender of your partners”, you’re right. (I’m sorry, that’s the way it was.) And you have to bear in mind that before becoming Christians, that was the standard way of life for many of these people in the church – it was a normal part of the culture they lived in. Just think how easy it would have been for someone to say, “Well, even though I’m a Christian now and I don’t believe in Dionysos any more, it’s still the best party in town. What harm could it be to go and indulge myself a little as long as I don’t actually believe in or worship the false gods?”

Further aggravating the problem were those teaching the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. We heard about them before in the letter to the church at Ephesus. In a nutshell, the Nicolaitans taught that since Christ died for the sins of the whole world, and since he has freed those who believe in his Gospel from the curse and penalty of the Law, Christians are under no obligation to order their lives according to the commandments of God. Since you are already forgiven, it no longer makes any difference what you do. They taught that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was a license to sin: “Go do whatever you want. It’s okay: you’re forgiven.” So I’m sure you can see how this false doctrine dovetailed quite nicely with problems of temptation I’ve already mentioned. And so we see that the church at Pergamum suffered primarily from a lack of moral discipline. They were willing to compromise God’s Word, setting aside his absolute standards of right and wrong in order to conform to the deviant standards of their society.

And I don’t suppose that it’s very hard for any of us to see the similarity between the situation at Pergamum and the world we live in today. No, there are no idol temples where drunkenness and ritual prostitution are going on around here – but then we don’t need them because in our world these sorts of things go on in our homes: the sanctuaries to the gods and goddesses of the all-important self. Our society used to have a basic code of acceptable conduct, but these moral standards have all but collapsed. Now the basic creed is “if it feels good to you, if you think it will make you happy, well then go ahead and do it – because your personal pleasure is the highest good.” And we are constantly being bombarded by this message through television, books, magazines, and the culture at large.

And to a large degree we’ve allowed it to infiltrate the church. Certainly, we see it in the mainline liberal denominations that have long ago jettisoned any sense of propriety. Claiming “tolerance” as the highest Christian virtue, some of these churches seem to be running a race to see which can be the first to say with respect to just about any depraved behavior you can name, “We accept it as a healthy, normal, and God-pleasing part of the total human experience”. But even in relatively conservative church bodies like our own, there is constant pressure, from both without and within, to relax the standards of God’s unbending Law. And those who have the integrity to stand up and say, “No, this isn’t right. This is not the way God wants it to be” are made to be the villains. They’re told to “Relax. Lighten up. Get with it. That’s the way things are today.” They are condemned as being “non-mission-minded”. “Why, we’ll never be able to spread the Gospel if you go around saying people are sinning. You’ll only offend them. What are you trying to do, destroy the church? Don’t you love Jesus?”

You see? We’ve got the problems with the Balaams and Nicolaitans too. And I think it’s safe to say that we all have a certain self-interested tendency to be sympathetic to these false doctrines. After all, lowering the standard of God’s Law gets me off the hook too; it means I

don't have to feel guilty about my own sinful thoughts and desires. And it helps me avoid uncomfortable confrontations with others who are engaged in open sin.

But the problems with eliminating or degrading God's Law are many. Most obviously, it entails canceling huge portions of God's unchangeable Word. And because we understand that Christ *is* the Living Word of God, when you remove part of the Word from the church's proclamation you have removed Christ to the same degree. More importantly, the only way anyone ever comes to faith in the Gospel is by the Holy Spirit first convicting him of his sin. You have to know you're a sinner in need of salvation before you can understand or trust that Christ died for your sin to save you. Remove the Law from the Christian church, and you eliminate the need for the crucified Lord. Without the Law there is no Christianity. There's also no need for distinctly Christian behavior. Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men". That's not possible if we in the church are blindly stumbling in the same darkness as the world around us. Finally, when all is said and done, treating the Gospel as a license to sin is really nothing more than total contempt and disregard for Christ's love and sacrifice for us. He saved us from sin's curse to live as his righteous and holy people. When we continue in sin saying to ourselves, "It doesn't matter: I'm forgiven", the Scriptures say that we effectively crucify the Lord to ourselves again. Further, it speaks of those who want to continue in sin as washed pigs that return to wallow in their own filth, or as dogs that return to eat their own vomit. These are deliberately offensive images that tell us exactly how the Lord feels about it.

I've no doubt that this is why Jesus describes himself in this letter to the church at Pergamum as the one who holds the sharp two-edged sword. In the Bible, the sword is consistently a symbol of God's judgment. So there's a "sharp" word of warning here. Those who fail to repent of their false beliefs and sinful practices will not inherit the kingdom of God. They will be cut off from God's people. And it's no coincidence that that was Balaam's sad fate. To repay the Moabites and their allies for their treachery, the Israelites attacked them, and before he could get away with his loot, Balaam was cut down with a sword and died. So you might say that the prophet didn't profit from his evil advice.

So, if we wish to avoid the same fate, we need to see that the Lord's call for the church at Pergamum to repent applies also to us. To those who do repent, the Lord promises a white stone with a new name written on it. This curious statement refers to the ancient practice in which legal officials would announce their judgments with colored stones. Black meant guilty; white meant innocent. So the idea is that those who repent of their sin and trust in Christ will be declared righteous and innocent in God's sight – and they will be given a new name to match their whole new identity. For we who are in Christ are no longer our old sinful selves; but we are new people washed, sanctified, and justified by the Spirit of our God. May he then give us the grace to reflect that truth now in time, so that we may shine with it in all eternity. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!