**Pastor Tim’s Message Notes from 1-17-2021
To the Church in Pergamum…**

I shared some of my growing up journey with you months ago. When I was 12 years old, my family decided to do a bit of church shopping. This happens sometimes, doesn’t it? And sometimes it’s needed. Perhaps you’ve done that yourself.

After a bit of church shopping, my family landed at a certain United Methodist Church. It was during my time connected to this church that I came to faith in Christ. I grew a lot in my faith as well. I was part of a men’s group there. I even met my wife, Kara, there at a Christmas cantata one year.

So there are several reasons that the Lord led my family to that church years ago.

**Over time, however, churches can change**. And unfortunately, that church has become a church that has gradually seemed to have moved away from sound doctrine, from the authority Scripture, from the biblical view of family and relationships. They haven’t officially moved away, but they are teaching things that go against Scripture.

In fact, Charlie Salisbury, our former District Superintendent, has told me that he is amazed how I came out of that church.

And I think that the problem with this church is that it has tried to modify the gospel to become more culturally acceptable.

Now, please do not get me wrong, there are many Christians there that are working hard in the Lord. They help to feed people in poverty, they have an active outreach to youth in the community, there are numerous committed believers there. I have a friend who was a part of that committed men’s group that just passed on to be with Jesus.

So, it is not everywhere there, but there is a contingent that is in need of serious correction. To be honest, I am worried for this church, just as I am worried for the United Methodist Church as a whole. There are many in the United Methodist Church in America that are seeking to make the Bible more politically correct and less exclusive.

Our former church and our current denomination remind me a bit of the setting for the Church in Pergamum.

So please turn with me as we hear Jesus’ words together found in Revelation 2:12-17.

**12“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:**

**These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. 13I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.**

**14Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. 15Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.**

**17Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.**

Looking at Jesus’ words to the Christians Pergamum, the first thing to again note is that God has sent angels on assignment to help bring about his purposes. In all God’s churches, no matter their situations, the Lord has angelic help assigned to them. So please know that there are angels of God waring over the churches of this region, including ours.

As we consider Jesus’ words to the Christians in Pergamum, I would just like to share a little bit of context with you about the city itself.

Pergamum was a very religious city. They had all different temples and altars there. They had a 40’ altar to Zeus, for example. In fact, Pergamum was considered the leading religious center of the that part of the world.

But not only this, Pergamum was also the center for the imperial cult. This meant that it was popular there to worship the Roman Emperor as a god.

Suffice to say, Pergamum was not the center of the Bible belt. It was a very pagan town with lots of worship taking place to things other than the living God.

And not only this, but by the time of this message from Jesus, there has already been a Christian in Pergamum that was killed for their faith.

With this being said, let us begin to unpack Jesus’ words to them.

Jesus tells them **“These are words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword in his mouth.”**

This is an interesting greeting, isn’t it. What would this convey?

In the Roman Empire, the sword was viewed as symbolic of Roman sovereignty. It meant that Rome was to have total control over your life and the sword was a symbol of judgement for those who are enemies of Rome.

And here, Jesus tells them that He is the One who has the sharp double-edged sword.

Jesus was telling them that it was He who is the One who is sovereign over them. Not the emperor, not Rome. Jesus. Jesus is more powerfully.

And Jesus is the One who will execute judgment on those that choose to live as His enemies. So even in how Jesus greets them, it is reminding them that even a place like Pergamum, Jesus is Lord. Amen.

Then Jesus begins to demonstrate His sovereignty over them in what He knows about their situation.

**First**, He says, **“I know where you live, where Satan has his throne.”** In other words, Pergamum was the center of emperor worship in that area and was a city where a lot of pagan worship was taking place. Worship to false gods is actually worship to Satan. Satan has his throne there.

And Jesus’ words remind them that He knows their situation. He knows that not everyone is a Christian in Pergamum. He knows that they were against the grain in the culture.

**Second, Jesus commends them for holding fast to His Name and not denying their faith.** There were people in Pergamum that tried to get Christians to deny their faith. Christians were denounced as being atheists, because they did not worship all the gods of the Romans. They were seen as disloyal to Rome.

But these Christians as a whole had not denied their faith, even in a difficult environment.

**Third, Jesus demonstrates his knowledge of a specific example of a Christian having suffered and died for their faith in Pergamum**. Jesus says they **“have not denied my faith, even in the days of Antipas, who has witnessed and been faithful to me. He was put to death among you, where Satan lives.”**

So hearing these things would have been a huge encouragement to these believers in Pergamum.

Jesus knew them by name. He certainly knew Antipas by name.

And Jesus knows us as well. He knows us by Name. And He commends us as we keep the faith in difficult circumstances. Sisters and Brothers, our present days have not been easy. But keep the faith. Stay strong in the Lord, no matter what. He sees us and He will commend us if we stay faithful to Him.

Then Jesus switches gears to address his concern for them.

Jesus says, “**Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. 15Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.”**

While we do not know all the specifics of these false teachings that had taken hold of some within the church in Pergamum, most likely they had something to do with syncretism.

Syncretism is basically mixing a little bit of Christianity with a bit of this religion and that religion. And the hybrid that results is not Christianity.

In the Old Testament, sadly many of the people of Israel were led astray by their neighbors that enticed them to join them in their false worship and in their sexual immorality.

Often Satan tries this tactic with people. Instead of getting Christians to outright deny their faith, he seeks to get them to compromise in their moral and to add a little bit of false teaching within their beliefs.

The Lord knows that a little bit of really bad teaching can really mess people up in their thinking about God and in their living out the Christian life.

The enemy may try to get Christians to dabble in things like hypnotism or wege boards. We also need to watch out for Yoga, as it can be a doorway to syncretism. I am not against exercise, but I’m just saying that the enemy is clever and he will try to get us to mix Christianity with unchristian thinking and actions.

So while much of the church is staying strong in the faith, Jesus was warning them that this growing contingent being deceived must be confronted with their deception.

And Jesus tells the Christians in Pergamum to repent. To repent for them meant to lovingly confront the false teaching that was beginning to get a hold of the church. If the cancerous teaching was not addressed, Jesus told them that He would bring judgment on those that had fallen into this trap.

Let’s go back to the 21st century now. The question for us today is what Jesus is telling us in light of what He told the Christians in Pergamum many years ago.

First, Jesus knows us by name and He knows our unique circumstances. He knows that we do not live in the Bible belt. He knows that we face pressures to compromise in our faith.

Second, Jesus commends us for standing strong and persevering in our faith when things are difficult. Let’s be like Antipas, all in for Jesus no matter what!

Third, we must guard sound doctrine. We are to be people of the Book. We need to lovingly bring correction if Christians in our community begin to be swept up into trying to modify Christianity to make it more appealing to the world.

Part of this should come from the pulpit in the preaching ministry of the church; part of it is simply helping one another realize that Christ is to be Lord of our Lord, not meaning a part of our life.

I have seen how unhealthy thinking and teaching in a church or in a denomination begins to gradually take over. And Jesus wants to do what Barney Fife from *The Andy Griffith Show* often said, “let’s nip this in the bud.”

Jesus wanted to nip this problem within the Church in Pergamum in the bud.

We guard sound doctrine by committing ourselves to be people of the Book, by holding me and other leaders to a very high standard to teach the Word of God faithfully.

Reading our Bible Book of the month will not only increase your faith (as faith comes by hearing the word of God), but it also helps establish you in the sound doctrine.

So stay in the Word. You can read other Christian books, but the Bible must be our meat and potatoes, so to speak.

And finally, just do not give the enemy any place in your life. If you give him an inch, he will take a mile.

Even in difficult circumstances, even where Satan has his throne, so to speak, there is still no excuse for compromising the faith.

Sound teaching matters. The Lord is not a fan of syncretism. Mix Christianity with a bit of this and a little bit of that and we do not have Christianity.

Finally, Jesus concludes by saying this:

**Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.**

What does Jesus mean by this? First, those who are victorious are those who listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying and try to help others in the Body of Christ live lives fully for Him and not try to mix Jesus with some religious or to dilute Jesus’ message into a different message.

The Lord wants us as God’s people to care about sound doctrine. And not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the life of our church. Sound teaching is important.

Jesus mentions “hidden manna” and a “white stone” being given to them.

Hidden manna likely refers to how Jesus alone sustains and spiritually nourishes us.

It is hidden because not everyone responds to Jesus’ invitation. Not everyone follows after Him. But to those who daily come to Jesus to be sustained, Christ will not only satisfy us in the present, but He will eternally satisfy us. **We could say that Jesus is the hidden manna.**

And Jesus mentions this white stone with a new name written on it known only to the one who receives it.

White symbolizes purity. Christ is looking for a church that walks in purity. And the new name likely speaks of a new personal name that the Lord will bestow upon these overcomers.

Is. 62:2 states: **“You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.”**

So just as the Lord knew Antipas by name, Jesus knows us and He pursues a personal relationship with each follower. And while we are called to be Christians in community with one another, there is a sense of individual closeness with Christ in these words that each believer is known to Him in a unique way.

* To sum up Pergamum in a sentence, I would say “continue to persevere in faithfulness and help one another walk in faithfulness.” These words are just as true today.

Sources:

BibleGateway.com

Grant R. Osborne – Revelation Commentary