

STUMBLING BLOCKS

Revelation 2:12-17

Pliny, a Roman author, described the city of Pergamum as “by far the most distinguished city in Asia.” Pergamum was a university city boasting a library of more than two hundred thousand books. It was a center of worship for four of the most important pagan cults of that day—Zeus, Athene, Dionysos, and Asklepios. Pergamum was the official center in Asia for the imperial cult. It was the first city of Asia to receive permission to build a temple dedicated to the worship of a living ruler. In 29 B.C. Augustus granted permission for a temple to be erected in Pergamum to “the divine Augustus and the goddess Roma.”

In His letter to the angel of the church in Pergamum Jesus commends them for their faithfulness to His name even when Antipas was martyred, but rebukes them for allowing in their midst false teachers who were influencing them to compromise themselves with the prevailing culture.

❖ Comfort & Approval

- ✓ I know your circumstances (2:13)
Satanic activity was rampant because of the extreme amount of idolatry and emperor worship carried on in Pergamum.
- ✓ I know your faithfulness (2:13)
Antipas, a member of their church, had been killed for being a Christian. Yet church members remained faithful and steadfast in their commitment to Jesus.

☒ Critique

Some hold to the teachings of Balaam / Nicolaitans (2:14-15)

Balaam advised Balak to send beautiful Moabite women into the camp and invite the men of Israel to feasts in honor of their gods. Tasty meat, good wine, beautiful women; the men of Israel were hooked into idolatry and sexual immorality (Num. 25:1-9, 31:15-16). Since Balaam’s plan was successful, he became a prototype of all false teachers who influence believers into spiritual and sexual compromise (2 Pet 2:12-17; Jude 10-13).

The phrase “so also” ties together verses 14-15. The ancient “teaching of Balaam” and the contemporary teachings of the Nicolaitans were one in the same. Jesus is saying, “In the same way that Balaam subverted the Israelites, these false teachers are subverting you.”

The two primary errors of the Nicolaitans had to do with eating things sacrificed to idols and immorality. Most likely the problem was not the buying of meat offered to idols, which was sold in the market place, but in joining pagan neighbors in a meal, which involved the sacrifice of the meat to idols (1 Cor 10:14-22). It may well be that sexual immorality was also associated with these religious feasts. The pagans believed they could have a relationship with the gods by having sexual relations with the religious cult prostitutes. What at first may have appeared to be merely accepting the hospitality of a neighbor resulted in the Christian being defiled morally and spiritually.

✚ Counsel

Repent (2:16a)

The church is not accused of holding to such doctrine and practice as a whole, but is condemned for tolerating it to be held by some. While “some” are guilty of moral and spiritual defilement, the rest are guilty of tolerating such sin. Just as the church at Corinth failed to deal with the immorality in its congregation (1 Cor 5), so the church at Pergamum was tolerating sin within its members. To repent would require the elders to end the teachings of the Nicolaitans and call all church members to spiritual and moral obedience to the Word of Christ.

⊖ Chastisement

I will come and war against them with the sword of my mouth (2:16b)

Though we don’t know what form this would take, Jesus is declaring that if the elders and congregation will not, He Himself will put a stop to the teachings of the Nicolaitans by the authority and power of His Word.

✕ To the One Who Conquers

- ✓ I will give some of the hidden manna (2:17a)
In Jn. 6:48-49, Jesus spoke of Himself as the true bread from heaven that gives eternal life in contrast with the manna that sustained the physical lives of the Israelites for a time. The manna is “hidden” in the sense that the natural man cannot see or discern the things of Christ (1 Cor. 2:14). But the believer who “eats” the True Bread, the “hidden manna” will increasingly experience the abundant life Jesus came to give (Jn. 6:50-51, 10:10).
- ✓ I will give a white stone with a new name written on it (2:17b)
Pséphos, “stone”, refers to small pebbles that were used by Greeks and Egyptians in their calculations. This may be an allusion to the ancient custom among the Greeks of acquitting with a white stone or pebble and condemning with a black one.

Like a pet name shared between only a husband and wife, the new name may be an expression of Jesus’ intimate love for those believers who have not compromised their love for Him. The name may commemorate something of what God has accomplished in his or her life as they walked by faith in the midst of temptation.

❓ Do we, as church leaders and members, need to repent? Are we tolerating any teacher / teaching that encourages spiritual or moral compromise with our culture?

❓ Do we, as individuals, need to repent from spiritual or moral compromises we have made with the world and recommit ourselves to abiding in Christ (Jn. 15:1-17)?