

SESSION 3

Uncompromising with Truth



QUESTION 1:

What is a product you are unwilling to compromise on?

THE POINT

When it comes to biblical truth about Christ, there is no room for compromise.

THE PASSAGE

Revelation 2:12-17

THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Chameleons are fascinating little creatures. If you put a chameleon in a jar with green grass, it will begin to turn green. If you add some red berries, it begins to take on the color of the berries. Chameleons change colors to blend in. It's their way of adapting to their environment. They also change colors to warm up or cool down, or to communicate fear or anger. Again, this is a way to adapt to their environment.

Some people are like chameleons. In whatever situation or environment they find themselves, they adapt and “take on the color” of that environment. Their thinking and behavior adapt so that they blend in and look like the world around them. For followers of Christ, our true color should never be compromised. We have been called to live a life devoted to Christ and not compromise the truth of who He is and who we are in Christ.

The church at Pergamum compromised their faith in Christ by “changing their color” and becoming like those around them. As a result, Christ rebuked them.

Revelation 2:12-13

12 “Write to the angel of the church in Pergamum: Thus says the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword:

13 I know where you live—where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding on to my name and did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness who was put to death among you, where Satan lives.

Jesus’ third message was to “the church in Pergamum.” Pergamum was located north of Ephesus and Smyrna and was about 15 miles inland from the Aegean Sea. This city of around 160,000 was the religious and cultural center of the region. As a cultural center, some estimate that Pergamum may have housed as many as 200,000 papyrus and parchment volumes in its library. As a religious center, it was home to four major pagan temples: (1) the temple to Athena, the goddess of wisdom and the arts; (2) the temple of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy; (3) the temple of Zeus, the ruler of the heavens and father of the other gods; and (4) the shrine of Asclepius, the god of medicine, which was expanded into a popular medical spa. These temples were built upon the city’s most prominent place, the acropolis, which rose nearly a thousand feet in the midst of the city.

In the Roman Empire, Pergamum had been given the rare power to carry out capital punishment, which was symbolized by the sword. To the church in Pergamum, Jesus made it clear that He is the one who has the authority to judge by identifying Himself as “the one who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” When John saw Jesus in his earlier vision, he described “a sharp double-edged sword [that] came from His mouth” (Rev. 1:16). The writer of Hebrews declared the Word of God was “sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit,

joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). By His powerful word, Jesus truly is the One who ultimately judges.

Jesus was well aware of the city where this church lived. With four major temples dedicated to pagan worship, Pergamum could certainly be identified as “where Satan’s throne is.” In a city and culture that thrived on the worship of multiple false gods, the believers were to be commended because they were holding on to the name of Christ. To the culture around them, Jesus was just one of many gods, but these believers knew

His name was above all other names and only through Him could one be saved. They held strong to the fundamental truths about Christ and would not deny their faith.

We know little of “Antipas,” specifically mentioned as my faithful witness. Legend says Antipas was slowly roasted in a large brazen bowl as a sacrifice to the false gods for refusing to acknowledge Caesar as lord, but this cannot be verified. While we don’t know the details of how he died, we do know he stood for the truth of Jesus Christ and ultimately paid the supreme price with his own life.

Persecution continues today around the globe. Many believers, like Antipas, are standing strong in their faith even if it means dying

Pergamum

COMMENDED FOR:

1. REMAINING FAITHFUL TO
CHRIST AND HIS NAME
EVEN UNDER THE THREAT
OF DEATH

REBUKED FOR:

1. HOLDING TO FALSE
TEACHING
2. EATING FOOD SACRIFICED
TO IDOLS
3. PARTICIPATING IN SEXUAL
IMMORALITY

for the cause of Christ. They are keeping a bold witness to others in the midst of whatever Satan throws at them. We too need to stand with Christ no matter what and be identified as His faithful witness.

QUESTION 2:

What are some temptations Christians face living in a non-Christian culture?

Revelation 2:14-15

14 But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to place a stumbling block in front of the Israelites: to eat meat sacrificed to idols and to commit sexual immorality.

15 In the same way, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

KEY WORDS: **Balaam ... Balak** (v. 14)—These are references to a group in the church that was teaching heresy. The names refer to two characters in the Book of Numbers (Num. 22–25; 31:8,16).

Nicolaitans (v. 15)—This was the group whose false teachings were influencing some people in the churches. Possibly they mixed Christianity with pagan idolatry and ritual prostitution.

Even though Jesus commended their witness, He still condemned several actions being lived out among the people in this church. While many were remaining faithful to God and doing the works of Christ, others were compromising the truth by mixing it with false doctrine. Jesus mentioned two specific errors.

1. **The teaching of Balaam.** During Israel's wilderness wanderings, Balak, king of Moab was afraid of the Israelites. The Israelites had come out of years of bondage in Egypt, and

Balak was afraid they were going to rise up and kill him and his people. Balak sent word for Balaam to come and place a curse on the Israelites so that his army could destroy them.

Balaam was a prophet, and God told him not to place a curse on the Israelites, but instead offer words of blessings. Balaam knew he could not curse the Israelites, so instead he taught Balak how to manipulate and entice the Israelites into sin. He enticed them by causing them to believe eating food that was sacrificed to idols was acceptable. Balak also led them to believe sexual immorality was OK. Balak could not outwardly defeat Israel, but Balaam taught him how to defeat the Israelites through moral and spiritual compromise (Num. 22–25).

2. **The teaching of the Nicolaitans.** Little is known about this sect, but it appears to have allowed people to live without rules against self-indulgence. It may have been closely linked to the teachings of Balaam. This would explain the attraction of pagan idolatry and sexual immorality. Like those following Balaam, the Nicolaitans were leading people to compromise the truth that only comes through Jesus.

DIGGING DEEPER

THE NICOLAITANS

The origin of the Nicolaitans is far from certain. They are mentioned first in Revelation 2:6, then again in 2:15; John provides no clues to their origin.

Jesus hated the Nicolaitans' teachings, as did the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:6). Jesus' use of the Greek word *houtos*, translated "In the same way" in verse 15, indicates the teachings of Balaam and the teachings of the Nicolaitans

were one and the same (see Numbers 22–24). Moab's King Balak sent messengers to the prophet Balaam with money to hire him to curse Israel. Balaam blessed Israel instead. But he explained to Balak that if he could entice Israel to sin by worshiping Baal, eating meat offered to idols, and committing immoral acts, God would punish the nation. In short, Balaam's sin was to teach Balak to entice Israel to curse itself through willful idolatry and immorality.

Michael Priest, "The Nicolaitans," *Biblical Illustrator*, Summer 2015, 46–48.

The church today must be careful not to trade the truth of Christ or compromise God's Word and our walk with God. We are immersed in a culture that says, "If it feels good, do it!" "Live and let live"; "When in Rome, do as the Romans do"; and "Surely God wants us to be happy and have fun." But that's not what Christ teaches. Compromise can never be a part of a believer's life when it comes to standing on the truth of Christ.

QUESTION 3:

How can we determine whether a teaching or teacher is false?

Revelation 2:16-17

16 So repent! Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

17 Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name is inscribed that no one knows except the one who receives it."

Jesus concluded His message to the Pergamum church with a stern and solemn warning that they must repent! He assured them that failure to do so would bring dire consequences. Failure to heed and repent meant the word that came from his mouth would be a sword that would fight against those following the false teachings. The Israelites had put Balaam himself to death with the sword (Josh. 13:22), and "the sword of my mouth" would be quick and fierce judgment on those who followed Balaam's teaching.

Jesus is committed to fight against false doctrines and false practices within the church; therefore, as His followers, we also

should be devoted to do the same. If the church at Pergamum would do that—repent and stand unwaveringly on the truth of Christ—they would receive two rewards.

1. **Hidden manna.** God provided manna daily in the wilderness for the Israelites to feed and sustain them. Some of that manna was “hidden” in a golden pot and placed inside the ark of the covenant as a memorial to God’s provision for His faithful followers. In Jewish tradition, this hidden manna has been preserved and would feed and sustain God’s people when the Messiah came. Like “the marriage feast of the Lamb” (Rev. 19:9), this manna symbolized eternal life. This thought alone should inspire us to never compromise when it comes to standing on the truth of Christ and His Word.
2. **A white stone.** We don’t think much about rocks. In fact most of us try and remove rocks from places we don’t want them to be. This rock however would have been an incredibly precious gift in that time. “A white stone” could remind the church of the white stones given by judges to indicate they had found a person innocent. Or the white stone might symbolize the white stones that were often used as admission tickets to public events. Either way, the white stone was similar to the hidden manna in that it symbolized eternal life we gained through the forgiveness of Christ.

On this white stone “a new name” would be inscribed. Names carried a level of authority, and to be given this special name by Christ Himself signified both Christ’s authority over that individual and an intimate relationship with the individual. When we come to Christ, we are given a new name! We now share a relationship with Him.

QUESTION 4:

When have you seen someone refuse to compromise on biblical truth?

While this letter was written to the church at Pergamum, it also could have been written to many of our churches today. So many churches are turning away from sound doctrine and the truth of God's Word. If we compromise our position on biblical truth, then we also stand in danger of receiving judgment. God honors those with uncompromising faith, and we would do well to remain uncompromising in our churches as well as in our individual lives.

QUESTION 5:

What are some ways our church is like the church at Pergamum?

ENGAGE

What are some ways you have been guilty of compromising your faith in God?

What is preventing you from fully committing to God without compromise?

What makes it difficult to listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

LIVE IT OUT

What will you do with the truths from this passage?

- ▶ **Pray.** We live in a culture full of compromise. Pray, asking God to strengthen you to stand strong in the face of compromise. Pray also for your church to never compromise in matters of biblical truth.
- ▶ **Evaluate.** List ways people are tempted to compromise their faith or tolerate false teachings. Do a self-assessment to identify any ways you might have compromised on biblical teaching. Repent and determine to stand with Christ.
- ▶ **Confront.** If you know someone who is stepping into false teaching or compromise, lovingly confront that person and urge him or her to come back to the truth of Christ. Let God use you in the life of another, but it's important to do so by "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

