

The Danger of Compromise – Revelation 2:12-17

Read Text • A Redwood's Fall

1. Some years back, Park Rangers in Northern CA were surprised by the sudden fall of a massive redwood.
 - a. It was a sunny day with no wind. It just came crashing down for no apparent reason.
 - b. It had stood for over 400 years despite numerous earthquakes, fires, & lightning strikes.
2. Curious as to the cause of its fall, the Rangers took a closer look & found that tiny beetles had bored into the heart wood and eaten it away.
 - a. The redwood's bark usually protects it from such attacks.
 - b. But a small wound made many years before had allowed access.
 - c. Before sap could close it, a couple beetles bore in & made themselves a home.
3. They went to work until years later, the old giant toppled over.
4. Something similar was going on in the church at Pergamos.
 - a. The Church hadn't fallen Yet.
 - b. But compromise had set in & begun to weaken it.
5. Jesus warns them to deal with it quickly or it will spell their doom.

V12

¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, ‘These things says He who has the sharp 2-edged sword:

Background of Pergamos

1. This is now the 3rd letter Jesus dictated to the Apostle John when he was banished to the Island prison of Patmos.
2. It's addressed to the **angel**; *lit. messenger* of the Church, which in previous studies we've seen means the pastor.
 - a. He'd be the one the letter was **delivered** to, & would then **read** it to the congregation.
 - b. He'd also be the one who was to **implement** any instructions in it.
3. Pergamos was the **political** capital of the region; the center of the Roman administration.
 - a. Like the city of Smyrna we looked at last week, Pergamos threw in their lot with Rome **early**; when it was just emerging as a major power.
 - b. And like Smyrna, it was a large & beautiful city.
 - 1) The **Library** of Pergamos had 200,000 volumes. (Oxnard ~ half that!)
 - a) When **Mark Antony** came through the region, he confiscated it and had it shipped to his girlfriend Cleopatra.
 - b) The volumes were added to the Library of **Alexandria**, making it the greatest collection in the ancient world.
 - 2) Pergamos was famous all over the Roman world for its therapeutic health spa the **Asclepion**.
 - a) All the latest health treatments & remedies were found there.
 - b) It was the **Mayo Clinic** of the day.
 - c) The well-regarded Greek physician **Galen** was born in Pergamos.
 - 3) The city had dozens of temples to the many gods & goddesses people worshipped.
 - a) But the **most famous** was a huge **Altar to Zeus** in the center of the temple complex.
 - b) The thing was massive; 100' sq. & 60' tall.
 - c) Its sides were covered w/friezes depicting most of the Greek deities.
 - d) If there was one place that **summed up** Greco-Roman paganism, it was the Altar of Zeus in Pergamos.
 - e) It sits today in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, Germany.
4. In the midst of all this culture & sophistication, a church had been planted.
 - a. It had faithfully come through some rough times.
 - b. But a sickness had taken root.
5. So, Jesus describes Himself as the one w/a keen sword coming from His mouth; again drawing from the vision of Jesus in His glory John had in ch1.
 - a. An odd image but one easily understood.
 - b. In Heb. 4:12 & Eph 6:17, the sword is a symbol for God's Word.
 - c. It's 2-edged because it has dual-effect.

1) The Word of God either **convicts** & brings us to **repentance**;

2) Or, if we **refuse** to repent, to judges & condemns.

6. Jesus uses this descriptions of Himself to caution the church at Pergamos to be careful of how they respond to what He's about to say.

a. And what was true for them, is equally true for us.

b. Beloved Be careful **how** you respond to God's Word.

1) Look at v17 –

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

2) What Jesus said then, He says to us. The Spirit is still speaking.

3) This is STILL God's Word; regardless what Newsweek magazine says.

c. If what we look at today makes you uncomfortable, don't push back.

1) Don't rationalize, justify, makes excuses.

2) Turn from what's wrong to what's right.

V13

¹³ “I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne *is*. [stop]

1. Last week w/the church at Smyrna getting hammered by persecution, Jesus told them **He knew what they were going through**; how tough it was.

2. He **wanted** them to know that He knew.

3. **Here**, He says He knows **all about WHERE they live**

a. And describes it as the place where the devil rules.

b. Because Jesus doesn't explain, we can't be **certain** what that means.

c. But that's not going to stop me speculating

1) Pergamos was the provincial **capital**; the **seat** of Roman government.

2) **Caesar-worship** was enforced there on pain of death.

3) We see that in what Jesus says next . . .

And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas *was* My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

4) The church father Tertullian said **Antipas** was the pastor at Pergamos.

a) During the reign of Domitian, he'd refused to worship the Emperor & had been executed.

b) They put him inside a bronze bull, then lit a fire under it.

5) As the center of such a **homicidal** govt, Pergamos WAS the place satan ruled.

6) But that **Altar to Zeus** was also a center of immorality that encouraged people to sin in the most grotesque ways.

7) And at the **Asclepion**, that health spa & school; the central deity worshiped there was a **serpent**.

8) As Christians walked the streets of their city, **everywhere they went**, they saw & heard the evidence of a world that was hostile to God and those who love Him.

3. Some years back, right after Las Vegas gave up trying to be more family-friendly, we went there for a family event.

a. Lynn has relatives there & there was a reunion, so we went.

b. She & I went down to the Strip one night to take in the sights.

c. And oh my, did we get an eye- & ear-full!

d. Everywhere we went there was evidence of the most gross immorality.

e. People **exhausted** themselves & wealth to indulge their lusts.

4. Now – I now that there are some really good churches in Las Vegas.

a. The CC there is a **great** church!

b. But I gotta' say; it has to be tough living in **Lost Wages**.

c. For goodness sake; sometimes it tough living in Oxnard!

5. Jesus commends their past loyalty. But note that what He commends is IN THE PAST.

a. He doesn't says, “You **DON'T** deny My Name.”

b. It's, “You **DIDN'T** deny it.” Past tense. Something's changed.

Vs14-15

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you,

1. He had **only 1 thing** against Ephesus & w/Smyrna, **nothing**.

2. Here w/Pergamos, Jesus has a **list** . . . because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.
3. Twice He says, “You have those who hold” then He identifies an abhorrent doctrine.
 - a. The entire church hasn’t gone over to false teaching, just a **portion** of it.
 - b. Heresy hasn’t taken OVER, but it has taken ROOT.
 - c. And what Jesus wants changed is their toleration for those who teach and hold these false doctrines. They need to repent or be gone.
4. Remember that Jesus commended the Ephesians for their doctrinal purity;
 - a. For testing & rejecting people who falsely claimed to speak for God.
 - b. He commended them for refuting the error of the Nicolaitans.
5. Those false teachers who’d been **booted from** Ephesus, **settled in** at Pergamos.
6. Who are these guys that Jesus is “no bueno” w/them hanging out w/His peeps?

Balaamites

1. You’ll find the story of Balaam in Numbers 22-25.
2. We don’t have time to go into it this morning; let me just cut to the chase
 - a. On their journey to the Promised Land, Israel had to pass thru the region of Moab.
 - b. Their king was worried they’d grab some of his land, so he bribed a famous prophet named Balaam to come and curse them.
 - c. Balaam knew God’s plan was to **bless** Israel. But if Israel **rebelled**, He’d judge her.
 - d. So he told the king of Moab HOW to get Israel to fall.
 - 1) The women of Moab were to dress up in seductive clothes & take a stroll thru the camp of Israel.
 - 2) The Jewish men would see them & be enticed.
 - 3) Then, the women should ask if they wanted to see **how** they worshipped the Moabite gods.
 - 4) That worship was super immoral but played to their lust.
 - e. The tactic worked & hundreds went off into acts of gross idolatry.
 - f. God sent a plague that ravaged the camp of Israel until they repented.
3. **Greed** was Balaam’s undoing. >> He wanted the reward the Moabite king offered.
4. So he gave advice on how to weaken the people of God thru compromise.
5. Jesus used that 1500 year old story as a peg to hang what was wrong in Pergamos on.
6. And this is where knowing the history of that time is crucial.
 - a. Every trade & most businesses had their own **guild** or **faction**.
 - 1) If you were a mason, you belonged to the masons’ guild.
 - 2) If you were a **silversmith**, you were a member of the smiths’ guild.
 - 3) A merchant, the merchants’ guild; & on it went.
 - b. They were an ancient version of the modern **labor union**.
 - c. If you weren’t **in** a guild, work was often hard to find.
 - d. And if you **did** work, you’d most likely be beaten up by guild members angry you’re taking their work.
 - e. So most people went along to get along.
 - f. The problem for the Christians was, the guilds **met** in pagan temples.
 - g. Each had a **patron deity**.
 - 1) Meetings were usually held a couple times a year
 - 2) And were meals where the food had been offered **to** the idol.
 - h. Then, after the meal, you supported the temple financially by paying a ritual prostitute who’d [uh-hum] “entertain” you.
7. So the Christians withdrew from the guilds.
 - a. That meant a **loss of income**,
 - b. Added to the persecution they already faced, just for being a Christian
8. So some said it was okay for believers to **remain** in the guilds.
 - a. It was okay to join in the feasts & eat the food offered to idols.
 - b. It was even permitted to engage the after-meal antics with the priestesses.

- c. After all “You gotta’ go along to get along.”
9. Like ancient Balaam, some who taught this had probably **begun** as solid teachers & preachers.
 - a. But they wearied of the constant pressure of persecution & what faith in Christ cost them.
 - b. As they walked the ancient mall, they saw **goodies** for sale & wanted them.
 - c. They reasoned if they dialed down devotion & compromised a bit, things would be so much easier.
10. And besides, they reasoned, was eating meat sacrificed to an idol really sin?
 - a. An idol is just a piece of wood, right?
 - b. And meat is just food. What difference does it make **where** it’s eaten?
11. **Fornication**? Well, Christians are **way out of touch** w/the rest of the WORLD on that.
 - a. The Greeks & Romans were all about sexual freedom.
 - b. Popular culture didn’t expect anyone to limit sex to marriage.
 - c. The ONLY people of the ancient world who did were Jews & Christians.
 - d. Greeks thought it unhealthy to put restraints on sex. So, go ahead!
 - e. And if you’re bothered by guilt, remember—God forgives. **That’s His job.**
12. Does this sound at all familiar?
 - a. It ought to, because the more things change, the more they stay the same.
 - b. This is what we’re hearing today.
 - c. Young people are expected to have sex before marriage.
 - d. It’s **unhealthy** if they don’t.
 - e. The current stat is that only 3% of Americans are virgins when they marry.
 - f. Among those who identify as “highly religious” it’s 20%.
13. Bottom Line: These false teachers advocated, not holiness but compromise.
 - a. They weren’t saying to the people of the church of Pergamos, “Let’s be more like Jesus.”
 - b. They said, “Let’s be more like the world.”
 - c. “Let’s tamp down the things that make us stand out and cause us to look & sound different.”
 - d. Jesus’ message to His Church, a word by the way that means a called-out assembly, is
 - e. “Come out and be separate.” = Rev. 18:4

Nicolaitans

1. The 2nd group Jesus has a problem with he calls **Nicolaitans**.
 - a. He commended the Ephesians for NOT putting up with them.
 - b. But they’ve found a home in the church at Pergamos.
2. We don’t know what they taught.
 - a. There’s nothing in either the NT nor history that describes them.
 - b. No group was labeled this in any of the ancient records.
 - c. This is **Jesus’ name** for them – & therein lies the clue for knowing what they taught.
3. **Nikos** = victory **Nike**. To overcome; same as when Jesus gives promises to those who overcome.
4. **Laos** = people; we get **laity** from it.
 - a. The Nicolaitans were those who overcame the people.
 - b. That is, they **divided** the Church into a **professional clergy & laity**; priests & people.
5. We’d **expect** this in a fellowship that **allowed** the compromise of the Balaamites.
 - a. Once you let the camel stick his nose in the tent, it isn’t long till the whole herd is inside.
 - b. Compromise is difficult to stop. Once it starts rolling it tends to gain momentum.
6. You may remember that Israel was supposed to be a theocracy w/God as their king.
 - a. But during the days of Samuel, they demanded a human king & got Saul.
 - b. They said they wanted to be like all the other nations around them who had kings.
 - c. Well, there were those in the Early Church who wanted it to look like the other religions practiced in the Empire.
 - d. They all had grand temples & elaborate priesthoods with impressive rituals. Why can’t we too?
7. Jesus never intended His Church to have a formal priesthood.
 - a. The NT says in Christ **we’re ALL priests**.
 - b. That was the whole point of the veil being torn down the middle when Jesus died.
 - c. While the early church did have pastors & elders, there was no **distinction** between them & the people they led.

- d. There was no divide between clergy & laity; all were equal with differing gifts & calling.
8. History is **clear** on this; it wasn't until the Church & State became buddies that a formal priesthood became a set feature of the Church.
 - a. But there were guys already pushing for it here in Pergamos at the end of the 1st C.
 - b. And Jesus isn't happy. He came to do away with all that.
 - c. He's reconciled us to God; restored us to a **personal** & intimate relationship w/God.
 - d. That's why He **HATES** the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.
 - e. They wanted to destroy that intimacy by slipping a guy in a robe & goofy hat between the people & Jesus.
9. Let's be careful to note- Jesus doesn't speak **TO** either the Balaamites or Nicolaitans.
 - a. His message is to the pastor & people of the church at Pergamos.
 - b. His critique is that they've ALLOWED these false teachers a foothold.
 - c. Twice He says, "You have those who [promulgate falsehood]"
10. I know this is kinda' gross, but it's an apt illustration
 - a. Ever had food-poisoning? Okay You know what your body does to get rid of it, right?
 - b. As gross as that is; the point is that a healthy body expels poison – and it ain't pretty!
11. The same is true of a healthy church, which is the Body of Christ.
 - a. When there's something in it that imperils' it, it needs to be gotten rid of.
 - b. It's not pretty. It's not **nice**.
 - c. But show me in the Bible ANYWHERE we're supposed to be NICE.
 - d. Loving, kind, patient – sure. Sorry nice is not one of the fruit of the Spirit.
12. You need to know that when we discover someone is promulgating a false doctrine, we'll call them to either repent or go. And Here's why . . .

V16

¹⁶ Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.

1. This call to repent was to both the false teachers & those tolerated them.
2. Jesus puts the kibosh on compromise with the world.
3. As you well know, that word **Repent** means to have a change of mind that leads to a change of direction.
4. If you've been convicted by the Spirit about **anything** today, can I suggest instead of pushing back **against** that conviction by rationalizing & talking yourself into why it's okay, that you do the exact opposite, & take concrete steps to go the other way.
5. Rather than stepping **toward** sin, step **away**.
6. Ask God to make what displeases Him, loathsome to you.

CONCLUSION

1. There's 1 more v. in this letter.
2. But it contains a promise that is so rich, it deserves its own message.
3. It's one of my all-time favorite vs in the Bible.
4. So we'll save it for next week.

A Parable on Compromise

1. Let's end with this classic Russian Parable on the Danger of Compromise
 2. A hunter raised his rifle and took careful aim at a large bear.
 3. He was just about to pull the trigger, when the bear turned to him and in a soothing voice, said, "Isn't it better to talk than to shoot? What do you want? Come. Let's negotiate."
 4. Lowering his rifle, the hunter replied, "I want a fur coat."
 5. "Good," said the bear, "that's a reasonable request. All I want is a full stomach.
- Let's see if we can reach a compromise."
6. An hour later, the bear walked away **alone**. The negotiations were successful.
 7. The bear had a full stomach, & the hunter had a fur coat.
 8. The world is a hungry bear w/a soothing voice.
 - a. Don't compromise with it; don't sit down to negotiate.
 - b. Choose Jesus.