

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF ASIA

The Church in a Bad Neighborhood

Program #1049

Eddie Parrish & Mark Teske

EDDIE: If you're like most people, you're very concerned about your neighborhood. Nobody wants to live in a bad neighborhood. It's interesting that Jesus once dictated a letter to a congregation of His people that existed in a very bad neighborhood. That's going to be our topic of study today.

EDDIE: Welcome to *The Truth In Love*. We appreciate the fact that you've decided to spend some time with us today studying from God's word. We're right in the middle of a series of lessons on the seven churches of Asia from Revelation chapters 1-3. Mark Teske is with us again on our program today, and Mark is going to summarize where we've been so far in our study.

MARK: We started in the beginning of Revelation 2 with the church at Ephesus, the church that had left their first love. They were commended for several things, their hard work, labor and toil, as well as for their patience and doctrinal purity. But the Lord said, "I have this against you, that you have left your first love," (Revelation 2:4). Then we moved on to the church at Smyrna, a church that Jesus had no condemnation of. But He did commend them for several things and warned them about the persecutions that were about to come upon them and how they could prepare for that. He encouraged them as they prepared for the suffering that was to come in a short period of time. Now as we move forward, we get to the church at Pergamos, where we have something a little different. We have a church that has suffered

persecution and, frankly, has fallen short doctrinally in the process.

EDDIE: First of all, let's talk a little bit about Pergamos, the city, and give a little background information. The city of Pergamos was located about 70 miles north of Ephesus, and the city boasted a library of some 200,000 volumes. The library in Pergamos was second only to the great library of Alexandria, Egypt, that is so famous in history. Another interesting fact about the city is that parchment was created in Pergamos. At a time when Egypt refused to sell papyrus to other nations, they had to come up with some alternative for their documents, and so parchment was created in the city of Pergamos. We don't know the specific details of the establishing of the Lord's church in the city of Pergamos, but obviously, by the end of the first century, when the book of Revelation was written, there was a congregation of people there. And we've called this the "church in a bad neighborhood," because of the existence of what Jesus will say is Satan's throne. We'll talk a little bit about that in just a moment. We will begin in Revelation 2:12-17, where the letter to the church in Pergamos is located. Jesus begins by identifying Himself in Revelation 2:12 with a couple of very important statements about His being the One who has the sharp, two-edged sword.

MARK: That's a figure not unfamiliar to those of us who have studied the Bible. In Hebrews 4:12, we read about the sharp, two-edged sword that divides the soul and the spirit and the bone and marrow. We see the two-edged sword, which is the word of God, that is able to penetrate things that are seemingly impenetrable to us as mere human beings. But the word of God is able to divide, and make distinction between two items. The image of the two-edged sword is something that shouldn't be unfamiliar to us.

EDDIE: Right. The passage in Hebrews 4 that you mentioned says that the word is very sharp, and is able to discern the thoughts and the intents of the heart. So through the use of the word of God, we're able to discern and come to know our own character, the characteristics of our own inner selves, and our hearts. And Jesus is going to lay bare, if you will, and open up the heart and character of the congregation of His people here in Pergamos. Another thing that this reference to His word and the power of it, and the fact that it's a sharp sword, really

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Eddie Parrish, Speaker
Mark Teske, Executive Director

The Truth in Love
P.O. Box 865
Hurst, TX 76053

www.thetruthinlove.com
requests@thetruthinlove.com

thing that He says, as far as incentive, is this idea of a white stone with a new name being given. There are a number of possibilities with this, as far as the study that I've done. Sometimes a white stone was given to a man who had been tried in a criminal case but acquitted, somebody who was innocent of charges and therefore was free. Sometimes a white stone was given to a man who had been freed from slavery, maybe signifying citizenship. Sometimes the winner of a race was given a white stone. So white stones were used in a lot of contexts in the first century, and it could have been any of these. There may have been some meaning in that which would have been special to the church at Pergamos that we're just simply unaware of. But the point is that it is a blessing, nonetheless.

MARK: It was a blessing for those who were able to withstand. And as we look at the beginning of that verse, "To him who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," we see again the applicability, not only to the church at Pergamos, but to us as well. Jesus is saying the lessons that are being taught here are not just specific to them, but are general in nature. I think that goes back again to the completeness that we get from the number seven with the seven churches, and basically, if the shoe fits, wear it.

EDDIE: Very well said. We appreciate the time that you have spent with us today in our study. Things may look bad at times in our country as far as the spiritual climate, the lack of emphasis on spiritual things and the attempts to have God removed from our public consciousness. Things may look bad, and they may get worse. I'm not a prophet nor a prophet's son, to borrow the words of the prophet Amos, (Amos 7:14) but we don't know what the future holds. Perhaps the most important thing we learn from the church here in Pergamos is that God says compromise is not allowed. We have no right to compromise, regardless of the circumstances.

If you'd like to have a copy of today's lesson, we'd love for you to have that in the form of a cassette tape or CD or DVD, or perhaps a copy of one of our written pamphlets, *From My Heart To Yours* or *Salvation Simplified*. If you'll contact us at P.O. Box 865, Hurst, Texas 76053, we'll be glad to get you a copy of any of those materials absolutely free of charge. You can also contact us through our e-mail address, requests@thetruthinlove.com or our website, www.thetruthinlove.com.

underscores and highlights is the authority of Christ and the authority of His word. There are a number of places where Jesus spoke about His own authority.

MARK: We see, inherent in the symbol of the sword, the strength there. A parent obviously wouldn't use a sword to discipline a child. It's much too powerful an instrument for that. The sword is used for seriously maiming or killing. It's a very powerful weapon and one that must be used very carefully. But the word of God, because of its very nature, has that power, and in many references to it we read about the skill with which it is used. It's a very powerful weapon.

EDDIE: Yes, it's a weapon of war. And Jesus will even say in Revelation 2:16, concerning the church, "Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth." His word is a penetrating thing, and it's something that's used in the fight against evil. In the listing of the parts of the Christian armor in Ephesians 6, Paul says, "Take also to yourselves the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." That's part of the armor that we wear and the things that we're to use in our fight against that which is evil and in our fight for that which is good. So Jesus, as He does in all these letters, identifies Himself as the One with the sharp, two-edged sword. He's the One with authority and power. So whatever it is that He says about this congregation, as with all the others, is going to be authoritative. It will be dead-on correct, and they will have no defense if He says something negative about their character and their actions. And, regrettably, He will do that.

MARK: As we hear the introduction to His words to them, He says that same refrain that we've heard time and time again, "I know your works." We see Jesus with that intimate knowledge, not only of the circumstances of the church, but of the thoughts and intents of the heart, as the passage in Hebrews states as well. He has a very deep and intimate knowledge of what's going on, and He's about to show us that knowledge.

EDDIE: Yes. He begins in verse 13 with a commendation for a number of things. He did this with the church in Ephesus. "I know your works," and mentioned some things that were good about the

congregation. He does that here. In verse 13, He says "I know your works." He also says He knows where they live. He knows their location. As we said before, their location was in a pretty bad neighborhood, as they were living in a place where the throne of Satan existed. That's what Jesus says concerning their location. He knows where they live. He knows the circumstances in which they are in. He knows the environment in which they were trying to be faithful and loyal, and He said that Satan's throne was located there. That's interesting terminology. What might He have in mind there?

MARK: That obviously was not a literal throne to Satan himself as a deity, but it was an idolatrous temple that was established about 29 B.C. by Augustus. Many false sacrifices were offered there. Pergamos was a place where such a temple and altar existed, which was quite common in the days that they would have idolatrous temples. Greek and Roman mythology was filled with this type of activity. But in Pergamos, it's a little bit different because this was the center of the Roman state religion for over 200 years. So this was the epitome of those idolatrous temples, right here within the city of Pergamos.

EDDIE: And by the end of the first century, it was quite possible that if you were unwilling to worship the emperor at one of these altars to a false god, you could forfeit a lot of things, not the least of which was your own life. So it was a very difficult and very tough environment for a Christian to live in and to try to be faithful.

MARK: Earlier in this chapter, the church at Smyrna had been warned about a persecution that was coming from the "synagogue of Satan," as it was referred. This is the same type of persecution that the church at Pergamos had already endured. They had already been through it. As we look at our own lives and look at the persecution that the church has taken over the years, we see some problems and some persecution there as well. We don't know what the future's going to hold for us, but it may not be as bright as it has been in the past.

EDDIE: That's right. We live in a place where, thankfully, we still have a lot of freedoms as far as our ability to worship and serve God, however, slowly but surely, a lot of those freedoms are being infringed upon, and it may, in coming years, become more difficult for us to be

who were among them that were holding to these false doctrines. And the Lord did not want that evil to be tolerated. Paul once talked about a little leaven or yeast leavening an entire lump of dough. And that can happen in congregations. When a little bit of sin is tolerated, it can affect the whole church.

MARK: Again, the weapon of choice that Jesus refers to here is the sword that is able to discern, to cut through and properly divide each side in the situation. So we have a congregation that really has a mixture here of some who are faithful and some who are not faithful. The Lord said He would come with that implement of war, the sword which is very strong, powerful and lethal, and would make that division.

EDDIE: This congregation, if they didn't heed the Lord's words, were going to have a fight on their hands. And if there was a fight, the outcome would never be in doubt. The last thing any church wants to have is a fight against God, because I guarantee you it's not a fight you're going to win. And this was a matter of extreme importance for the church here. Yes, they had their good points, but these bad points needed to be changed, and they needed to be changed quickly before the Lord came and dealt with them in a very severe manner. Following His assessment of them, their good points and their bad points and the encouragement for them to repent, then He offers them some incentive, and He says something about manna that they would be able to enjoy. I think that's another of those Old Testament references.

MARK: Again, back when the children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, up until the point when they crossed over the Jordan River into the promised land, God provided them with food to eat, manna. Every day except the Sabbath, that manna was provided for them very consistently. We see God's provision for them. And here He says the ones in the church at Pergamos who overcome will receive the "hidden manna." That manna is hidden, giving me some idea within my mind to believe that it couldn't be taken away from them. God had hidden that in a way that it was going to be protected and safe. He would provide for their very needs. That would be a very comforting thought, given the situation they were dealing with.

EDDIE: Yes, it would. There's incentive. If you obey, repent and come back to me, I will provide for your needs. Then another interesting

is touted as a great virtue by the world around us. But when we put that in light of what scripture teaches, we can see that Jesus does not want us to compromise at all. We need to doctrinally “stick to our guns,” so to speak.

EDDIE: That's right. Another thing that He talks about as far as having something against them, is not only this doctrine of Balaam that some were holding to, but also some who were holding to the doctrine and deeds of the Nicolaitans. We've already referenced the Nicolaitans back with the church at Ephesus. The church at Ephesus was commended for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which, Jesus said, “I also hate,” (Revelation 2:6). The church in Pergamos was guilty of embracing the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. As we pointed out a few programs ago, we don't know a whole lot about who the Nicolaitans were, but it seems, from what has been discovered, that they espoused some kind of antinomian doctrine, or antilaw doctrine, believing that you could just live any way that you wanted to, a teaching and a life of license. Evidently, these brethren were guilty of living that way, believing they were not confined to God's laws.

MARK: Jesus' answer to that comes in the very first word of verse 16. He says to them, “Repent.” In II Corinthians 7:10, we read that “godly sorrow produces repentance.” Repentance is being sorry for what you've done and then have that sorrow produce within you actions different than what you've been doing in the past. They had hurt God by compromising the faith and they needed to be sorry and change their minds and consistent with that, to change their actions also.

EDDIE: It's interesting that when He talks about this need to repent, it would obviously have reference to those who were guilty of espousing these doctrines, yet He's also addressing this to those who were faithful. If you notice the pronouns that He uses in the text, He speaks of “you” having held fast, and He references “those” who were guilty. And He says, repent, or I will come to you and fight against “them.” It's interesting terminology. The Lord's going to come among the church there, among all of them, and fight against those who are guilty. So there seems to have been not only the guilt of those who were espousing the doctrine of the Nicolaitans and the doctrine of Balaam, but there may have been some tolerance by the otherwise faithful, of tolerating those

faithful to God. But regardless of how difficult or easy it may be to be obedient to God, we have to be obedient nonetheless. There's some indication, as Jesus goes on with His commendation, that even in these difficult circumstances where their lives were in danger, they did hold fast to the truth, because He says concerning them, “you hold fast to My name.” The idea of holding fast is to grasp tightly. “You hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith,” (Revelation 2:13). I think that is interesting terminology where Jesus refers to His faith as opposed to the way we sometimes refer to faith as “my” faith as a human being or “your” faith or somebody else's faith. Jesus talks about His faith.

MARK: One of the politically correct terms of today is “you have your own faith.” When we look at the Biblical discussion of faith, we see in Ephesians 4:5, there is “one faith.” It states very clearly in Jude 3 we are to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.” Again, that unique “one.” We are to take it very seriously. We should contend, strive, and fight for that one faith.

EDDIE: Yes. You talk about the terminology we use today, and we say things like, “You have your faith, and I have my faith,” referencing our system of beliefs. Somebody may ask you of what faith are you, and they may want to talk about their faith, as far as what system of religion they belong to. But the New Testament's clear. When you're talking about it in terms of a religious system of belief, there's just one. There is “one faith,” (Ephesians 4:5) as Mark correctly pointed out. And to these brethren in Pergamos, Jesus said, you've been persecuted, you live where Satan's throne is located, but there was a time when you did not deny my faith. He even references a martyr in the church there at Pergamos when He says, “Even in the days in which Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was killed among you,” which seems to indicate that Antipas was murdered, with the church at Pergamos as witnesses to it. It is indicated that they were there at the time. Perhaps the authorities wanted to make an example out of Antipas for the rest of them. And he says Antipas was killed among you, (literally, by your side) and yet, even in the middle of that, these brethren at that time were standing strong.

MARK: When we see the great example that they have of holding fast, and holding strong to the faith during such intense persecution, it really causes us to do some self-examination. How far are we willing to

go to defend and contend for the faith? Oftentimes the persecution that we claim that we have pales in comparison to what they dealt with, yet we see people who claim the faith, who actually back away and don't hold fast as these brethren did back in Pergamos.

EDDIE: Yes. We have a lot to be ashamed of at times. Somebody may look at us and say that we are right-wing extremists, and we just wilt. Some of us can't even stand that. We can't stand to have somebody say something as awful and terrible as that, as if that means anything. But people will hurl what we consider insults that really, in the grand scheme of things, are just words, and yet sometimes just in the face of the possibility of facing that kind of statement from somebody else, we just wilt, compromise and give up and don't even stand up for what's right. Here were people who evidently stood and watched a man be slaughtered in front of them because of his loyalty to the faith of Christ. And He says they still were not deterred. These were people that had shown their ability to maintain their loyalty under the worst possible circumstances. We could learn a lot from folks like that.

MARK: As we listen to this story and as it unfolds for us here in scripture, at this point, most of us, being human, would think if they could stand up to that, they could stand up to everything. This must be a great church that's able to hold fast to their faith even unto death. And Antipas was a martyr that's described here. They can handle anything if they can handle this. But once again, the words of Jesus come back to haunt the church there at Pergamos.

EDDIE: Very similarly to the way He spoke to the church at Ephesus, Jesus said, "I have a few things against you." They had some good points, and He commended them for that, but He said they had some problems, too. He outlines those in Revelation 2:14-15. One of the first things He mentions is that some of them had begun to hold to the doctrine of Balaam. As Mark pointed out earlier, this was a congregation that had shown their ability to stand fast in the face of opposition, but there were some among them who had compromised doctrinally, and they had begun to espouse false teaching of some kind. Jesus describes this doctrine of Balaam here in Revelation 2 as teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before God's people, by teaching to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit fornication. Now, here's

another one of those Old Testament references that draws us back to an instance long ago, and if we look at that from a historical perspective and look at it as it appeared in the Old Testament, we get an idea of what it was that some of these brethren in Pergamos were guilty of doing.

MARK: Yes. The story of Balaam and Balak is in Numbers 22-25. We see there that Balaam was hired by Balak to curse the children of Israel. And he was told by God that he could only speak the things that he was given. Several times he was brought up on the mountain and looked to the children of Israel, and he could only speak blessings upon them. And so Balak's attempt to curse the children of Israel didn't work. After that event, Balaam said, ah, but there is the so-called Achilles heel of these people. He said you can get them to commit fornication with these women and get them into idolatry, and that's what will get them. And sadly and tragically, his wicked plot worked with the children of Israel back in Numbers 25.

EDDIE: Yes. Balaam knew that God would not allow him personally to pronounce this curse upon His people, but he knew that the holiness of God would not tolerate evil. And as Mark pointed out, he got these Moabite women to seduce them, and they committed gross immorality (fornication) with the Moabite women, so corrupting themselves that God had no choice but to curse the people because of their sinfulness and God's holiness. And we're also told in the New Testament concerning Balaam's sin that it included things like compromise and greed. Peter referred to that in II Peter 2:15. Jude 11 also references this idea of compromise and greed. Basically, it boiled down to Balaam compromising what was right for greedy purposes and material gain. In that context, it tells us what appears to have been going on with some of these brethren in Pergamos. They were evidently compromising spirituality and their loyalty to Christ so that they could enjoy some material safety for a while.

MARK: So what we have here are some who are loyal to the faith amidst this persecution, and others who haven't been able to stick to the faith, and who have come across this rather adulterated form of Christianity, where a compromise has been brought in. And clearly, as we look at 21st century America, we see compromise as something that