

JESUS IS HE WHO SEARCHES HEARTS AND MINDS

Revelation 2:12-29

Key Verse: 2:23

“I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.”

In this passage, glorified Jesus speaks to the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira. A common factor of the two churches is that they were influenced by false teaching. The words “teaching” or “taught” appear five times in the book of Revelation, all in this passage (14[2],15,20,24). Teaching is so important for the development of our character and spiritual formation. God gave human beings hearts and minds so that we can grow from infants into mature people who can know God and have fellowship with him. For this reason, the type of education we receive, especially spiritual education, is very important. We are all educated in many ways as we grow up: by our parents, by schools, by friends, books and the media. Those who are well educated become productive people and reap a lot of benefits throughout their lifetimes. That is why most parents sacrifice themselves to educate their children. But we should be careful about what kinds of teachings influence us. Some teachings are very helpful, but others are poisonous. We Christians should discern what is right and wrong, good and evil, true and false, based on the word of God. God gave us the Holy Scriptures, which make us wise for salvation, and are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2Ti 3:15-16). In today’s passage, the glorified Jesus warns us against false teaching and tells us to hold on to gospel truth.

First, Pergamum--influenced by the teachings of the Nicolaitans (12-17). Verse 12a says, “To the angel of the church in Pergamum write.” The city of Pergamum was magnificent, with 100,000 people, located 70 miles north of Smyrna. It was an important intellectual city, with a library of more than 200,000 volumes. It was the chief center of worship for four of the greatest pagan deities— Zeus, Athena, Dionysus, and Asclepius, as well as a center of emperor worship. This environment was hostile to Christians. It was not easy for them to keep their faith; it was easy to compromise. To this church, Jesus identified himself, saying, “These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword” (12b). The double-edged sword symbolically represents the two-fold power of God’s word: it condemns the world for its sin, and also punishes those in the church who compromise with the world. Jesus never condones sin, whether in the world or in the church.

In verse 13 Jesus commends the church at Pergamum: “I 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.” The words “Satan has his throne,” and “where Satan lives,” indicate that Satan had strongholds in Pergamum. This may refer to the altar of Zeus. It was a monumental, colonnaded court in the form of a horseshoe about 120 by 112 feet. The podium was 18 feet high. Around the frieze was a series of sculptures depicting the battles between the gods and the giants. Satan’s throne may also refer to the temple of Asklepios--the god of medicine, symbolized by a snake. Many people came to the temple for healing. They would lay on the floor hoping to be touched by one of the snakes and healed. To Christians, this snake temple clearly sounds like Satan’s throne. Satan’s throne may also

refer to the place of emperor worship which was strongly emphasized, even required. Jesus knew how difficult it was for Christians to live in that city.

Despite all the challenges, the Christians there had remained true to Jesus' name. They were forcefully coerced to renounce Jesus' name, but they did not compromise. Rather, they identified as Christians publicly, even though they lost benefits or were persecuted. To them, remaining true to Jesus was a matter of life and death. The best example was Antipas. He testified to Jesus--even to the point of death. He embraced present suffering for eternal glory. He valued Christ and his kingdom more than comfort and pleasure in this world. Jesus highly commended him as "my faithful witness." "Witness" comes from the Greek word "martyr." These days, many believers in many countries, such as Egypt, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, North Korea, China, and even Mexico, have the same struggle as the believers in Pergamum. For example, in Pakistan during April of 2018, at a Sunday service in a Methodist church, eight people were killed and 30 injured in an attack by ISIS. Christians in Pakistan represent just 1.6% of the total population of 200 million. They suffer discrimination daily and live in constant fear of being accused of blasphemy.¹ When we hear these kinds of stories, we can feel burdened. Why? As human beings we don't want to sacrifice that much. Actually, we cannot bear that kind of suffering or death with our own strength. But when God helps us, it is possible. Someone once asked D.L. Moody, "Have you grace to be a martyr?" "No," he replied, "I have not. But if God wanted me to be one, he would give me a martyr's grace."² The point is not that we should all become martyrs. It is that we may remain true to Jesus' name at any cost. Let's pray that we may do so by God's grace.

After commending the church, Jesus pointed out their problem by saying, "Nevertheless, I have a few things against you...." The word "nevertheless" appears two times in today's passage. In both cases it marks a transition from Jesus' commendation to his rebuke. This teaches us that to Jesus, the good points of the church did not exempt them from rebuke. Many people try to pile up their good deeds to compensate for their sins. However, this does not solve our problem with Jesus. The only thing that satisfies Jesus is to acknowledge our sins and repent. Jesus called out their problem, the false teaching of the Nicolaitans, in verses 14b-15. Here "the teaching of Balaam" is compared to "the teaching of the Nicolaitans." It calls to mind an Old Testament example in Numbers 22-24 which illustrated a current problem in their church. In that event, the Moabite king Balak hired a Gentile prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites, but God inspired Balaam to bless them. Right after this, the Moabite women seduced Israelite men and led them to indulge in sexual immorality and to worship their gods (Nu 25:1-3). Moses tells us that Balaam advised Balak to carry out this enticement (Nu 31:16). Out of one side of his mouth Balaam blessed God's people and out of the other he caused them to stumble. Likewise, the Nicolaitans in Pergamum were leading believers into sexual immorality and idol worship. Some of the things they said must have been true and Biblical. At the same time they condoned sexual immorality publicly and through the influence of their lives and led people into sin. God's people must be very discerning toward such teachers. Muslim false teachers have influenced Christian missionary-sending countries like America and Korea. They recruit handsome Muslim gentlemen and teach them how to seduce lonely Christian women, marry them, and have children. Then they use the children to pressure the mother to convert the entire family to Islam. Even worse, many Christian

¹ https://issuu.com/acnusa/docs/today_s_christian_martyrs-_2017-201/22

² <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28764217-a-martyr-s-grace>

leaders in America do not teach the Bible clearly in regard to sexual immorality. It is one reason so many have stumbled.

The teaching of the Nicolaitans was very effective. The people of Pergamum had observed cultural festivals for generations, which focused on worshipping Roman gods and emperors. This kind of idol worship was always accompanied by illicit sexual behavior. Idolatry and immorality were as natural to them as water to fish. It was so easy for Christians to compromise with that culture. But to compromise even a little bit is to start down a slippery slope from which one cannot recover. The Bible says, "a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough" (1Co 5:6). Christians must not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Ro 12:2a). God says, "Be holy, because I am holy" (1Pe 1:16). 1 Corinthians 6:9b says, "Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." As Christians, especially as Bible teachers, we must not compromise with sin. Rather, we should challenge sin in the culture and help people be transformed by the power of God's word.

Jesus taught us how to get out of the bad influence of sin in the culture. He said, "Repent therefore!" (16a) "Repent," "metanoeo" in Greek, means change one's way of life as the result of a complete change of thought and attitude with regard to sin and righteousness. Some people focus only on changing behavior. This always fails. But when our thought and attitude is completely changed, our behavior naturally changes too. The problem is that we cannot bring about such a drastic change in ourselves. It is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why we should humbly ask God's mercy in order to repent. What would happen if the people of Pergamum did not repent? Jesus said, "Otherwise, I will soon come to you and fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (16b). The pronouns "you" and "them" follow a common Hebrew idiom which means it refers to the church. The word "soon" means "quickly and speedily." Jesus would suddenly come in judgment of the church at Pergamum. His sharp, double-edged sword was ready to strike. No one would be able to stand against him. This was not a threat, but a warning given in love. Let's take this warning to heart and recognize how serious it is to compromise with sin in the church.

The glorified Jesus concludes his letter to Pergamum in verse 17. Hearing what the Spirit says to the church is vital. "Hear" means to accept into one's heart and to obey. Only those who are humble can hear Jesus' words like this. When we hear Jesus' words carefully, we can receive his true blessing and have victory. Jesus' blessings are hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it. Hidden manna, which the Israelites kept in a jar inside the ark of the covenant, represents Jesus Christ, the Bread of life (Jn 6:48-51). This nourishes us to grow in the image of Jesus; it truly satisfies our souls (Jn 6:35). The white stone symbolizes purity and victory. It was associated with acquittal in court and with admission to special feasts for athletic victors or members of a guild. The new name written on it turns it into a personal invitation card to the heavenly Messianic wedding feast. Only those who have this white stone invitation will be admitted to the feast. Do you have one? If so, you are a most blessed person.

Second, Thyatira--influenced by the teachings of Jezebel (18-29). It is helpful to compare and contrast the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira. Both were influenced by false teaching, but the source and degree were different. In Pergamum, it came from outside the church and affected a

minority; the majority remained true to Jesus. In Thyatira, it came from inside the church and affected the majority; only a minority had not compromised.

Thyatira was the gateway to Pergamum, which was located 40 miles away to the southeast. It was a commercial city, known for its influential trade guilds and their patron deities. The trade guilds can be compared to labor unions in America. Anyone who does not participate in them is marginalized and has a hard time surviving. In those times, trade guilds celebrated their deity's holidays with pagan festivals which promoted the worship of idols and illicit sexual activity. Thyatira was the hometown of Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, which the city was famous for. She was Paul's first convert in Philippi. Her house church may have participated in the church at Thyatira. It is likely that this church was planted during Paul's ministry in Ephesus.

What did Jesus say to this church? "These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze" (18b). The phrase "Son of God" appears only here in the book of Revelation. Jesus wanted to emphasize to this church his divinity. "...eyes like blazing fire" tell us that Jesus has piercing vision. He sees and knows everything; nothing can be hidden from him. Jesus' feet like burnished bronze indicate his power to crush his enemies and bring complete victory. The church in Thyatira should know that Jesus is not just the friend of sinners, but the Judge who is omniscient and mighty.

Jesus began by commending them: "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first" (19). They were not shrinking back and stagnating; they were active. They were not doing good deeds in order to gain salvation, but as a result of being saved. They produced good deeds and service out of their love and faith. Out of this same love and faith grew perseverance. Unlike the Ephesian church, which was doing less, this church was doing more than they did at first. When we see this commendation, this seems like a wonderful church with nothing wrong. But Jesus, whose eyes are like blazing fire, saw a serious problem inside this church. What was it?

Jesus said, "I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet..." (20a). Tolerance is considered one of the greatest virtues in American society. Tolerance is good, especially of people from different cultures and with different characters. However, the church should not tolerate anti-biblical teachings in the name of love, grace and unity. The problem of the Thyatiran church is that they tolerated the false teaching of Jezebel. Jezebel was a Baal worshiping queen in the 9th century B.C., who married King Ahab of Israel. Her influence led the whole nation into Baal worship (1Ki 16:31-32). The false prophetess in Thyatira was like Jezebel. Jesus said, "By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols" (20b). Her teachings are described in verse 24 as "Satan's so-called deep secrets," which probably refers to the dualism taught by gnostics. They claimed that flesh is evil and spirit is good, based on Greek philosophy. They did not believe that the flesh or body could be redeemed. They taught that whatever a person did in the body would not affect spiritual reality. They abused the doctrine of grace by making it a license to sin. This woman's teaching was very persuasive and attractive to many people. It seemed to resolve the tension Christians had while trying to do business in a pagan culture. This teaching became so prevalent that the church could not stand against it; they tolerated it. But Jesus would not tolerate it. He confronted it as the Judge.

Jesus graciously gave “Jezebel” time to repent of her immorality. Jesus convicted her for her sin and warned her that she should repent. But she was stubborn, proud of having many followers, and refused to repent. This brought Jesus’ judgment upon her. Verse 22 starts with the word “So.” It is from the Greek word “idou” (behold) meaning “look, listen, pay attention.” Jesus declares, “I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of their ways. I will strike her children dead” (22,23a). Jesus judged not only the one who spread false teaching, but her followers and her children as well. This is still a warning to us today. Last week, the United Methodist Church split. One group decided to tolerate LGBT clergy and same sex weddings; the other group did not. We should not tolerate teachings which lead to sexual immorality and idol worship. Jesus gave them a strong warning, “Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds” (23b). Sometimes we are very concerned about how people view us. We may think that if we are in the majority we are right. But to Jesus what matters is not the number, but the quality of faith in people’s hearts. Jesus sees the motives of our hearts and knows the thoughts in our minds. And he will judge each of us according to our deeds (Ro 2:6). Jesus judges not only each individual, but also the church as a whole. So we should all live before God and make it our goal to please God whatever we do (2Co 5:9).

Now Jesus gives a word of exhortation to the godly remnant in Thyatira. They resisted the false teaching of Jezebel with faith. Jesus did not impose any other burden on them except to hold on to the gospel truth until he came (24-25). To those who would keep faith and do his will to the end, Jesus gave two amazing promises. First, Jesus would give them authority to rule over the nations (26-27). Here, “rule” comes from the Greek word “shepherd.” Jesus’ exercises decisive authority with a shepherd’s care. He will share this authority, victory over God’s enemies, and kingdom rule with believers (1:6; 3:21; 20:4; 2Ti 2:12). Second, Jesus would give them the morning star (28). The morning star appears only when the night is over and a new day is at hand. It gave people of the time clear direction and hope. This refers to the exalted Christ Jesus himself, who ends the long night of Satan’s rule in the universe (22:16). We will do well to pay attention to what the Spirit says to the churches (29). Let’s not compromise with or tolerate false teaching, but hold on to gospel truth until Jesus comes.