

## **“Jesus Speaks to His Church: Hold Fast to Truth”**

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Revelation 2:12-17

**In the second and third chapters of the Book of Revelation, we find a series of letters written to various churches in which Jesus offers both words of comfort and challenge. Though these letters were written to ancient churches, we are finding they have much to say to our church today.**

**This morning we take up the letter to the church in Pergamum. The city of Pergamum was built on a hill 1,000 feet above the surrounding countryside in what is today western Turkey, creating a natural fortress. It was a sophisticated city, a center of Greek culture and education, boasting a 200,000 volume library and a very large theatre. It was also the center of various religious cults. The city’s chief god was Asklepios, the god of healing, whose symbol was a serpent. (Pergamum was the site of an ancient medical school. It was also something of a health spa.) There were also temples to Zeus and to Athena, to Dionysius, and to the Emperor Augustus. Pergamum rivaled Ephesus in its worship of idols and had a highly charged spiritual atmosphere. Listen now as we read what Jesus says to his church:**

<sup>12</sup> “To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. <sup>13</sup> 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, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives.

<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. <sup>15</sup> Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup> Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

<sup>17</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. <sup>1</sup>

*“I know where you live,” said Jesus to the church at Pergamum. “I know what you are dealing with, the issues you face, the pressures you must withstand. Now you must listen to me...”*

Jesus knew it wasn’t easy to be a Christian in Pergamum. This pagan city was a place of religious confusion – there were so many competing claims of truth, so many gods clamoring for allegiance, so many voices promising salvation. There was a temple on practically every hill, each with its own set of values and obligations. The young church in this place was being tossed about like a small boat in a turbulent sea of strange doctrines and unusual philosophies - the church was seriously in danger of losing its Christian identity – of compromising its faith or leaving the faith altogether.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996 (electronic ed.) (Re 2:12–17). Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

This pagan city was nothing less than a battleground – only here the battle was not between soldiers but between ideas. Here the issue was not so much between goodness and evil as between truth and error. Would the church at Pergamum hold fast to the truth, or would it listen to false teachers and be led astray?

Jesus knew what this church was up against and commended many of them for holding fast to truth. *“You did not deny my name”* said Jesus. *“You didn’t deny your faith in me.”* One disciple by the name of Antipas is mentioned as one who stood strong in his witness and who died a martyr. We don’t know anything more about this fellow, but his faith seemed to have impressed Jesus. Apparently, there were many in this church who cared about the truth and who stood strong for the truth. And yet at the same time, there appeared to be many others who were being far too accommodating of false teaching. The Lord doesn’t hesitate in giving them a stern warning:

<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. <sup>15</sup> Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

We don’t know very much about the teachings of Balaam or of the Nicolaitans. In the Old Testament book of Numbers we learn about Balaam, who caused the people of Israel to turn to idol worship. It seems that the Nicolaitans were false teachers who apparently taught that Christians were free to eat food offered to idols and to practice immorality in the name of religion. Whoever they were, or whatever they taught, they presented a clear and present danger to the church. The very survival of the church was at stake. Jesus therefore, doesn’t hesitate to use strong words: *“Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.”* Error needed to be rooted out at all costs. The Christians at Pergamum must not tolerate teaching that, though outwardly appealing, would lead to their spiritual ruin.

As I think about the pressures facing the church at Pergamum and the sort of environment in which they were called to minister, I can’t help but see parallels with the kind of situation we face in our church today. We too live in a culture that is a battleground of ideas. We are bombarded daily by a bewildering variety of ideas, values, beliefs and influences – many that are diametrically opposed to one another. We live in an ideological war zone where there are competing truth claims. Different religions vie for the allegiance of human hearts. Various philosophies abound. Secular humanists, New Agers, practitioners of the occult, advocates of various political ideologies...all add their voices and teachings to the mix. Pick your flavor! In keeping with the times, many people seem to be inventing their own designer religion, where you pick and choose from the best of various traditions, combine them, and make it up as you go. This is what you call “smorgasbord religion” – it’s a little of this and a little bit of that. It does seem to appeal to many these days. They don’t seem to be asking whether a particular religion or faith is true or not, but whether it works.

The notion of ultimate, absolute truth seems out of fashion. The only absolute truth today seems to be that there is no truth – all is relative – truth is in the eye of the beholder. Today it seems to be okay to search for truth as long as you don’t find it. Tolerance is now the supreme virtue, and tolerance appears to mean embracing every idea that comes down the pike, whether it is true and helpful or not. Christian faith, which was once considered to be public truth – that

is, truth for everybody and acknowledged as such – has been relegated to the private realm – *“it may be true for you but don’t you dare push it on anyone else!”*

Needless to say, people today are spiritually and morally confused. As in the days of the Roman Empire in the city of Pergamum, there are many teachers and teachings who would lead us down different paths. Truth and falsehood continue to wage their battle over our minds and hearts.

What we see in this letter to the church at Pergamum is a profound concern on Jesus’ part that his followers hold fast to what is true. For Jesus, truth matters. Jesus reminds his church that there is indeed such a thing as ultimate truth, and that truth is to be found in him. (Only Jesus can get away with saying that about himself and not sound arrogant.) The entire concern of this letter to Pergamum is that his followers know the truth and guard the truth and propagate the truth.

The truth that he is talking about is the truth about his person. *“You hold fast my name,”* he said. His name stands for himself – his identity; it is the revelation of who he is and what he has done - the fullness of his divine person and his saving work. Christianity is basically Christ himself. We are to hold fast to the truth that is Jesus; it is to know that Jesus of Nazareth is the unique Son of God and that he died to be the Savior of the world and that all who should believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

This is the sort of truth we cannot compromise. We must hold firmly to it.

Obviously, Jesus did not believe that all truth is relative. He did not claim to be just one truth or one reality among many. On the contrary, he called himself *“the way, the truth, and the life”* and the *“light of the world”*. He promised his disciples that if they continued in his word they would know the truth and the truth would set them free. He told Pontius Pilate that he had come into the world to bear witness to the truth. He loves the truth, he speaks the truth, he is the truth. There is no falsehood in him.

The dictionary defines truth as *“that which conforms to reality or fact -- that which is in accordance with what is, what has been or must be.”*

We believe that Jesus Christ is the ultimate reality- the root of what is and what was, the origin and framework for all that we can see and know and understand. Everything we know - all meaning - flows from him. He guides our feet; he shows us how to live.

If Jesus was so concerned about revealing truth, surely you and I cannot be indifferent to it. Truth matters. It matters what we believe. It shapes our understanding of God and how we live. It simply wrong to say, as I often hear, that it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere or live a decent life. For Jesus, holding fast to truth was a life and death matter. The survival of the Christian church depended upon it. Our very identity as Christians depends upon it.

Holding fast to truth, however, must always be tempered by love. You may remember that Jesus commended the church at Ephesus for their orthodoxy – their right belief – but chastised them for their lack of love. We can imagine they became very judgmental – very harsh in their

treatment of others. There is a tension here that we must always keep in mind. Truth becomes very hard if it is not softened by love. On the other hand, love becomes overly sentimental if is not strengthened by the truth. We must hold fast to truth, refusing to compromise on key principles, refusing to entertain patently false teaching. At the same time, we must be loving and respectful in treating those who differ with us, or who hold to a competing truth claim.

How, then, can you and I hold fast to the truth and steer clear of error in these confusing times? How can we be sure that we will not be led astray by false ideas and dead end philosophies?

In short, by listening to Jesus' word and obeying it. Jesus says to his church: *"Let anyone who has an ear, hear."* This is a recurring phrase in the letters to the churches of Revelation and it is found in other places in the New Testament. The way to hold fast to truth and avoid error is to listen to what Jesus Christ is saying through his Word and taking it to heart.

His word is likened to a sword in scripture. In the vision of the exalted Christ which John saw and described in the first chapter of Revelation, there was a sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth (1:16). The picture of Christ with a sword flashing from his mouth may seem to us very strange and peculiar...but the short Roman sword was tongue-like in shape. The sword is a symbol of Jesus' word that pierces and divides – it cuts through to the heart of the issues of life. The word of God is said by Paul to be "the sword of the Spirit." And in Hebrews we are told that God's word is *"living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* All this is to say that the Word of God stabs the conscience, and wounds the pride of sinners. It cuts away our camouflage and pierces our defenses. It lays bare our sin and our need, and cuts away all that is false and misleading and hurtful. Here in this letter to the church at Pergamum, he reminds the church that he possesses the sharp two-edged sword. We are to listen to his word, for it has authority.

If you and I would hold fast to truth and avoid error - maintaining our Christian identity - we must listen to the Word of God who is Jesus, and to the Word of God written which is the Bible, the only record we have of Jesus' words. There we find guidance that will never lead us astray. In the pages of scripture we will find principles for living that will always be true and right. God's word always proves itself faithful; it is our authority for knowing what to believe and how to live. His Word is truly a lamp unto our feet.

Back in the days when the Apostle Paul was spreading the gospel message, he went to preach in a Jewish synagogue in the town of Beroea. We are told in the book of Acts that *"these Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so."* "They examined the scriptures to see if these things were so." That's a great model for us. Do we want to distinguish what is true from what is false? We test everything by the teaching of scripture.

In this letter to the Christians at Pergamum, those who hold fast to the truth that is in Jesus Christ are given two promises. First, Jesus says: *"To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna."* Manna was food supplied by God to sustain God's people in the wilderness. It was food that satisfied them day by day. God fully provided for their physical needs in the days of Israel's wandering. The promise here seems to be that those who hold fast to truth – that is, to Jesus, who is the true bread of heaven – the bread of life – can expect to be fully

satisfied in this life and in the life to come. A person who knows the truth and who lives the truth can expect to be well fed – no more spiritual junk food; they shall feast on manna from heaven: spiritual food that truly satisfies.

Secondly, those who hold fast to the truth that is in Jesus Christ will be given a white stone, and *“on the white stone is written a new name known only to him who receives it.”* There has been a lot of speculation about the meaning of the white stone. A stone with the Roman letters SP imprinted upon it was given to gladiators or athletes as an award for valor. A white stone was used as a ticket for admittance into various games and social events – such as banquets. Perhaps the white stone represents our ticket into the heavenly banquet and to enjoying all its riches.

And as to the *name* on the stone - it was a first-century practice that after a serious illness a patient who recovered would often take a new name to signify his or her complete recovery.

The meaning may be that in spite of harm caused by being under the spell of false teaching, there can be healing. God’s word brings healing and wholeness. When we hold fast to the truth, we are given a new heart and a new identity. The truth sets us free to live differently – to live for God. We become new and different people with a healthy new outlook on life.

Truth matters! We are called to live by it and to stand up for it. The Christians at Pergamum, found it wasn’t easy to hold fast to truth in their culture; they were under severe pressure to think and live differently. But as they found out, standing up for truth brings blessings. It doesn’t escape our Lord’s notice.

May the God of truth, keep us faithful. May we hold to the truth as best we understand it, testing everything by the Word of God. As John Huss, the early Christian reformer put it:

*Seek the truth  
Listen to the truth  
Teach the truth  
Love the truth  
Abide by the truth  
And defend the truth  
Unto death.*

John Huss (C. 1370–1415)