

Moving Away From Jesus Christ

Culture is determined by those living in it. It changes from country to country and even from one city to another city. It includes language, customs, and laws. In some countries automobiles are driven on one side of the road, and in other country they may be driven on the other side. Each country has a different flag, anthem, currency, and heroes. In some countries the weekend starts on Thursday, and in others the weekend begins with Saturday. Customs are different and so are the standards of acceptable conduct. Many of us believe that culture is neither good or bad. But that conclusion is wrong when the people in a country, province, city, or group start determining what is moral. When men and women ignore God and start determining what is right and wrong, the moral standards are determined by the population. The moral standards change because the men and women change.

CITY OF PERGAMUM. The culture in Pergamum was like the culture in many other surrounding cities. You may soon discover that in some ways, it was like your culture. Pergamum was a famous city and the capital of Asia Minor. It was located in a valley and received its water from the Bergama Cayl River. The business center of the city (the acropolis) was located in a

fortified stronghold on a rocky hill about 1,000 feet (305 meters) above the valley floor.

A famous library was built in the city during the second century by Eumenes II. The library had 200,000 volumes and was a rival of the library in Alexandria, Egypt. In fact, the city was named after the parchment used to make many of the



Pergamum River Valley



Partmos and The Seven Churches

books. The library was part of Pergamum's culture. But this symbol of pride was given away by Mark Anthony to his "girl friend," Cleopatra, as a gift. The library of Alexandria became even more famous. Today, there are no ruins of this cultural symbol.

THE TEMPLES. Pergamum was also known for its many temples. We will discover shortly that the temples in Ephesus, Sardis, and Pergamum were part of their everyday life - their culture. When God through His apostles spoke out against these religions, He rejected more than just the events which occurred inside a few temples. A visitor to Pergamum would have seen some fantastic temples dedicated to Asclepius, Athena, Demeter, Dionysus, Serapius, Trajan, and Zeus. We will consider the various religions in the city. This is important because this changes our understanding of these ancient religions. We will see that these ancient religions are very different from the religious practices of our day. When God wants us to not be involved in other religions, He was talking about more than just worshipping at a temple.

The temple to Trajan honored a caesar of Rome as if he were

a god. The temple was beautiful and had a Corinthian design. The temple was on the terrace which led to the Pergamum's famous library. The temple to Zeus was erected when Pergamum defeated the Galatians. The temple stood on top of the acropolis. It was very large and could be seen from the valley floor. Zeus was considered to be the "god of gods" by the Greeks and Romans. Athena was believed to be the goddess of war, wisdom, and skill. If one had wanted success in battle, wisdom in business, or skill in trade, the person would have wanted to honor her with worship.

One of the most significant goddesses was Demeter. She was believed to provide the human race with food. This religion had priests and included fasting, sacrifices, singing of hymns, and the sprinkling of holy water. A person joined this religion by a secret rite of initiation. There were three steps called the Lesser Mysteries, the Greater Mysteries, and the Epopoteia. The pig was the symbol of cleanliness.

Dionysus was a god of wine and happiness. In the ancient artifacts, he holds a cup in his hand as symbol of his power. The main followers of this male god were women. This religion



Sacred Way To The Acropolis



Pergamum Acropolis and Theater



Fortifications of the Acropolis



Temple of Trajan



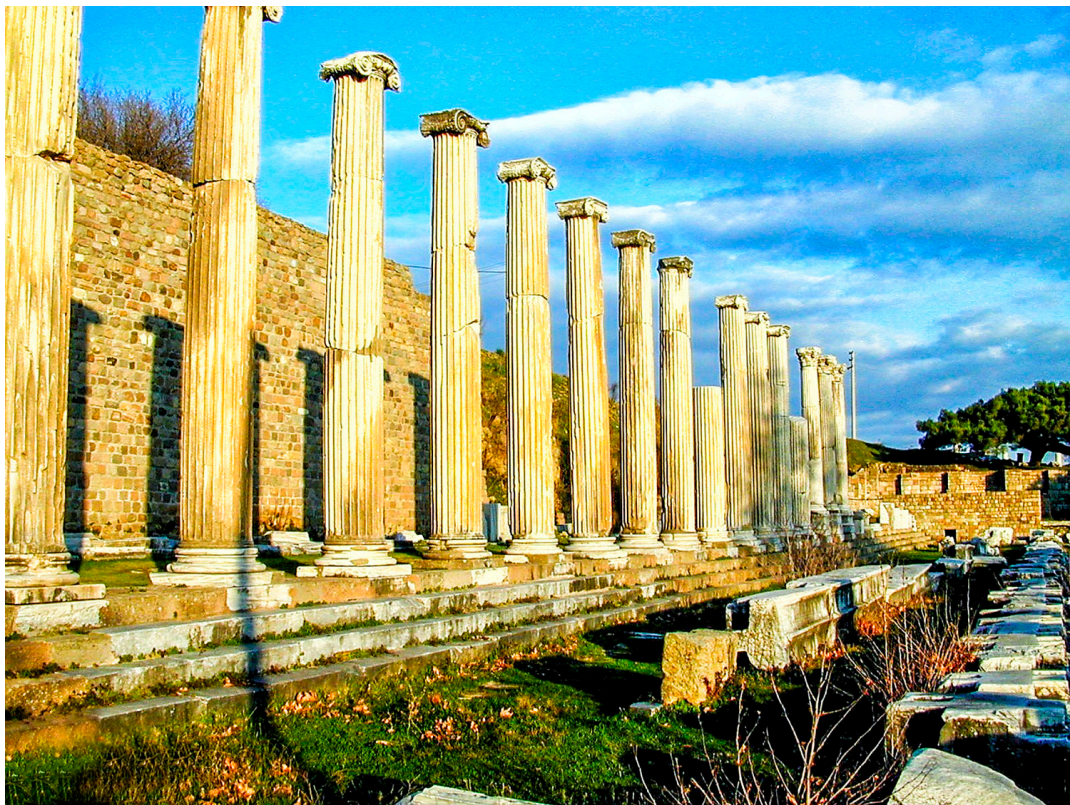
Temple of Zeus



Demeter Sacred Square



Temple of Serapis



Aesulpium Northern Stoa



Pergamum Theater

involved dances, banquets, masquerades, and singing. The religion appealed to wealthy women. Ancient pictures and inscriptions reveal that these women would remove their clothes and participate in sexual activities. This was a religion that appealed to women. It had a feminine touch.

There were two gods who dealt with health. The first was Serapius. He was the god of healing and fertility. He could deliver a person from danger and disease. He was called the savior god. Mystical revelations were important in this religion.

Asclepius was the god of medicine. This may be one the most significant religions of the ancient world. The temple was white and circular with a covered dome. Snakes were a common symbol of this worship. The most significant symbol was a rod with a snake wrapped around it. It is the same symbol used today by medical doctors. This god was called the “savior from sickness.” The temple area included trees, baths, theaters, gyms, and the library. This religion was concerned with the physical and mental health of each man and woman. It included culture, reading, the arts, cleanliness, and healing. There are ancient testimonies of men and women who say they

were cured of blindness and ulcers. The ancient records reveal that hypnosis, diet, bathing, and various medicines were commonly used to help people feel better and to “heal” their diseases.

WHAT IS YOUR RELIGION? Religion was more than worship at some temple. Religion was important to life and culture. A person could belong to several religions. Religion was connected to every part of daily life. It was the key to social success, food, happiness, the theater, literature, and even sex. While one religion provided for your mental and physical health, another was the key to pleasing the Roman caesar. The library, theater, medical doctor, bath house, and gardens were all part of the culture or religion of the day. The people determined the moral standard of the society and it was evil.

Religion is not very different today. For example, in the Society of Iobacchus, a person had to apply in order to be a member. The society voted on their admission on the ninth day of each month. If they were accepted, they had to make a monthly contribution. They had moral standards; members were not permitted to fight, swear, or be disorderly. The priest controlled the worship service. He determined who spoke.

This group had a treasurer who collected dues. Does this sound like religion today? They worshipped the gods of health, the cultural arts, sports, and pleasure. When they gathered together, they expected the citizens to worship “god,” donate money, practice some form of holiness, be cared for by a priest, and hear inspiring religious messages.

PERGAMUM’S CHRISTIANS. The Christians in Pergamum were not living in a culture free from religion. They were not living in a city of mud huts and straw shacks. They lived in an elegant city with roads, buildings, and temples made of stone and marble. They were living in a society that worshipped everything but the true God. Religion was more than bowing down before some idol in some temple.

Is it surprising that Jesus had the apostle John write,

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: “I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”
Revelation 2:12-13 (NASB)

Jesus is the One who is holding the two-edged sword. He reminds us that He is powerful and in control. He was calling

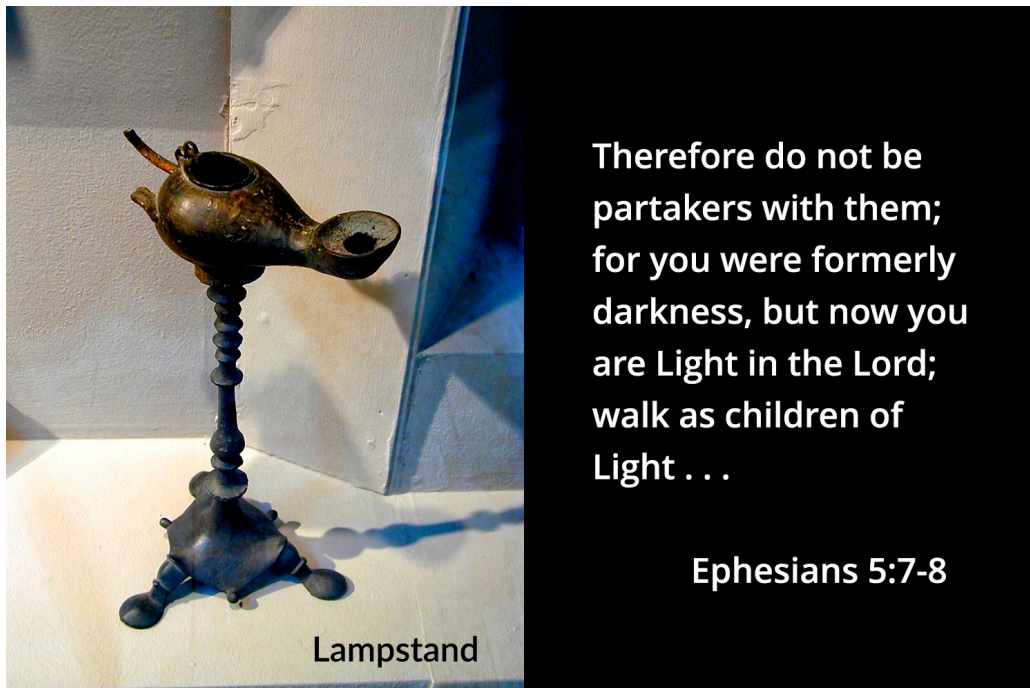
them to be faithful. These Christians have not left Jesus or denied the faith. So He encouraged them to continuing holding on.

They were living where Satan’s throne existed. This seems to refer to Pergamum’s many religious temples. These religions were created by Satan then and he is still doing it now. Today his religions are more sophisticated. They just look different, sound different, and seem different. Today, men and women “worship” the same things: health, pleasure, the cultural arts, entertainment, food, and sex. Jesus Christ is not very important to them.

SOMETHING IS WRONG. Even among some “Christians” Jesus Christ is not very important. Why? Because there is something wrong in many churches. There was something wrong in the church in Pergamum.

“But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit acts of immorality. Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”
Revelation 2:14-15 (NASB)

The culture of Pergamum was having an impact on these



Christians. The first sign of problems was that sexual immorality was now accepted by the church. Did you notice that Jesus rebuked them for the doctrine of Balaam and the teaching of the Nicolaitans? If we go back to Number 31:15-16, we discover that Balaam had counseled Balak to intermarry with the Israelites.

Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD. Numbers 31:16 (NASB)

God had warned the Israelites to not marry non-Jews. Today the Lord warns Christians to not marry non-Christians. Why? Because non-Christians will pull Christians away from God. This is happening today among Christians, too, just as in Pergamum.

SEXUAL FREEDOM. The doctrine of the Nicolaitans appears to come from Nicolas (Acts 6:5). Church historians tell us that his followers encouraged Christians to be sexually free - to have sex with anyone they desired. Today this is not usually taught, even though it is practiced in many churches. Sexual sin was being accepted in the church "as part of life." The culture of our world has come into the church and it has been accepted. It is the "new Christian morality." Just as sex was part of the religion of Dionysus, extra-marital sex is being accepted among some men and women who claim to be Christians. But Jesus warned them to stop.

"Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it." Revelation 2:16-17 (NASB)

Marriage with non-Christians, living together before marriage, premarital sex, or any sexual activity before marriage is a sin. Adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, bestiality, and pornography are sins too!

CONCLUSION. Sexual sin is not God's will for your life. God wants you to flee sexual sin. These Christians in Pergamum were living like non-Christians.

For you know what commandments we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God . . . 1 Thessalonians 4:2-5 (NASB)

God wants us to be holy. Society's standard of morality is not God's standard of holiness. God does not want us to accept our culture's standards but His. His moral standard is holiness.

. . . YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY. 1 Peter 1:16 (NASB)

The church at Ephesus had left their first love. That is the first step many take. The second step is to move toward false doctrine. It usually starts by a change in our life - a change in our moral standard. The second step is usually away from Jesus and toward some moral standard that is accepted by our society - by our culture. But it is not God's holiness. Where are you?