

# Church That Ignored False Teaching and Sin

I have been looking forward to this passage of Scripture that we will be studying! It will remind us of our culture, and it is a warning to every Christian church around the world. Our study is in Revelation 2:12-17. This letter was sent to the church in ancient Pergamum. This is the third message of seven messages sent to the seven churches in Asia Minor around the time of A.D. 95. The message begins with,

*And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: Revelation 2:12 (NASB)*

When this message was written in A.D. 95, the city of Pergamum was considered “the most distinguished city in Asia” according to Pliny.<sup>1</sup> Sir William Ramsay referred to it as a royal city.<sup>2</sup> Historical records state that Pergamum was a

very wealthy city, second only to the city of Ephesus. The city was sixty-five miles north of Smyrna and fifteen miles east from the Aegean Sea. It lay alongside the Caicus River in the Caicus Valley. The Acropolis of the city had a panoramic view from a 1,300-foot-high perch making it easy to view and dominate the entire region.<sup>3</sup> There was a sacred way leading from

the worship center of the god Asclepius up to the Acropolis.<sup>4</sup> Today only ruins are left of the ancient city and its middle fortifications. We will talk more about this city later. But the major point right now is to realize that Pergamum was a real city and had real people.

As we have pointed out before, “the angel” in verse 12 is a symbol that refers to the pastor. Therefore, this message was written to the pastor of the church and then also to the leaders and congregation. The statement “sharp two-edged sword” in this verse refers to Jesus because Revelation 1:16 says that Jesus has the sharp two-edged sword. So, this is the third message

from Christ to the churches in Asia Minor.

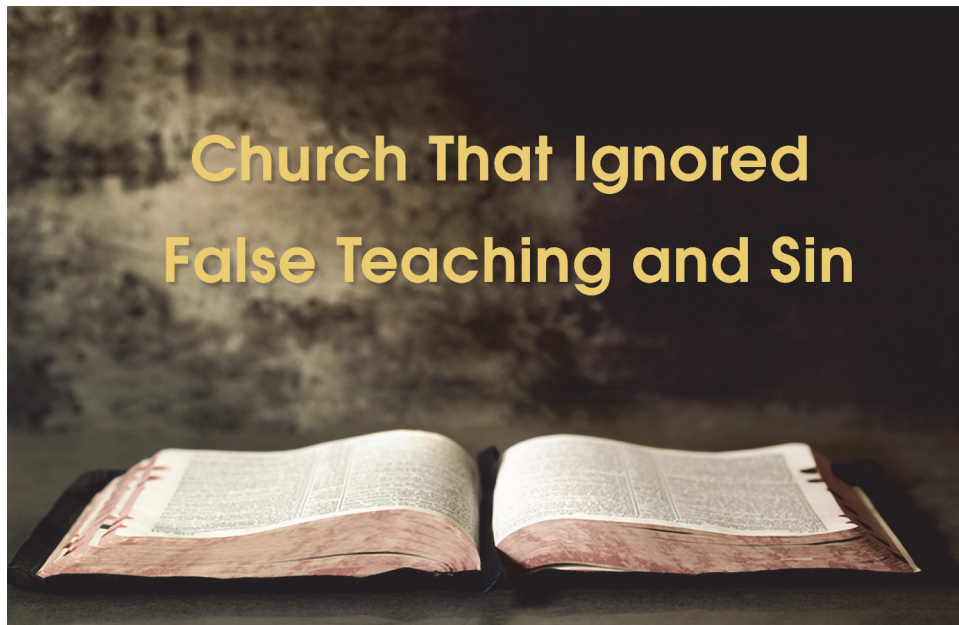
**PRAISE IS LIMITED FOR THIS CHURCH.**

The message begins in verse 13 and ends in verse 17. It can be divided into three parts: praise (v. 13), problems (v. 14-15) and a call for personal

repentance (v. 16). At the end of every message to the seven churches, Jesus leaves an encouraging word by giving them a promise of a reward. He does the same in this message in verse 17. There are also three major applications, as you will discover later. Verse 13 begins the praise for this church. It says,

*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*

<sup>4</sup>. Ibid.



1. John MacArthur. Revelation. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Moody Press. 1999. p. 84.

2. William M Ramsay. The Letters to the Seven Churches. Baker Book House. 1985 reprint of 1904. p. 282.

3. Sarah Yeomans, Ancient Pergamon. Biblical Archaeology Society website. May/June 2006.

*Meaning of “Satan’s throne” and “where Satan dwells.”*

There are three important points in this verse. The first point is that at the beginning of this verse, we are told Satan’s throne existed in this city and at the end of the verse that Satan dwells there. Now what do these two statements mean? There are different views. I believe these two phrases simply refer to the fact that Pergamum was the center of pagan worship in Asia Minor because the city had so many temples and shrines to the false gods and goddesses. We can be confident the citizens of this city thought they were very religious. They had gods and goddesses for every human need that supposedly supplied those needs. Zeus was believed to be the chief god, and consequently, Pergamum had a massive temple for him that occupied 13,408 sq. ft.

The city had many features that our own culture appreciates, such as elegant marble buildings, the practice of medicine, baths, the arts, theater, and education. There was a temple to Dionysus, the god of wine, merriment, happiness, and sex. There was a theater that could seat 10,000 people for the culturally minded. It was linked to the worship of Dionysus.<sup>5</sup> When people attended the theater, they had to pay for admittance. The monies were used to support the temple to Dionysus. The theater was carved into the hillside of the

Acropolis. It was so well designed that the speaker, speaking at normal volume down below on the platform, could be heard from the top row.

There was a temple to Athena, the goddess of war, wisdom, and skill. The goddess Demeter had a temple devoted to her because she was the goddess of food and good crops.

The city of Pergamum was especially known as a center of healing and health. This reputation may be due to the fact that there was a very large temple dedicated to the worship of Asclepius, the god of medicine. The symbol of Asclepius was a

snake. It is interesting to note that the symbol of medicine today is two intertwined snakes. It was believed the worship of Asclepius resulted in healing. Healing treatments often included snake bites and mud baths. There was also a three-level gymnasium connected to the worship of Asclepius. The very large gym-



nasium provided for physical fitness. They understood that physical fitness was important to health. The library connected to the worship of Asclepius reportedly had 200,000 books and it rivaled the great library in Alexandria, Egypt.

There were also temples to some of the Roman emperors. The most significant temple was to Trajan and it occupied the highest point on the Acropolis. Once there were temples to emperors, but the ruins have disappeared. The point is that emperor worship was very important in this city.

There are different views as to the meaning of “Satan’s

5. Pergamum PowerPoint. Pictorial Library of Bible Lands. BiblePlaces.com. vol. 9-13. 2019.

throne” and “where Satan dwells.” Some think they refer to the temple of Zeus. Others think they refer to the emperor worship or to worship of Asclepius. But I believe it simply refers to the fact that it was the center of pagan worship in Asia Minor with all these temples. Jesus’ point was that there was a very strong presence of the occult and demonic worship.

Here in the United States we have experienced relatively little demonic activity in the past. I believe God has been protecting this nation because so many Christians live here and worship Christ. But I believe we are now moving in the direction of the city of Pergamum.

Many years ago, I was asked to teach the book of Revelation to a Bible Club at a middle school during two lunch hours. Since it was not possible to teach the book of Revelation in two hours, I decided to just present the gospel. After the second and last session, a young girl approached me and told me that Satan had a message for me. She said, “Satan wants you to stop teaching the Bible!” I was surprised. I told her that was my last session. I did not want her to think I was stopping at Satan’s command. Then I asked to speak with her. As a result, I was able to talk with her for a few months. She said that she was the leader of a Satanist group on campus. I was able to present the gospel of Jesus Christ and she began to ask questions about Jesus. I was encouraged. But during the time of my interaction with her, we started having strange experiences at our home. On one occasion a dead cat, bleeding from its mouth, was hung on our front door. Other strange things were also happening. Eventually, I suspected demonic activity was occurring due to my interaction with this young girl. So, we began to pray. Shortly after that, she told me that she had been told to stop talking with me, and so our conversations came to an end. Then the odd things at the house stopped too! That was the power of prayer.

On one occasion, John MacArthur shared in a sermon that he joined another pastor in a woman’s home to deal with what they suspected was a demon. When John entered the home, the woman shouted in a loud bass voice “I know who you are, leave me alone. Go away!” Then he and the other pastor started praying until the demon left. I know the story was true because I knew both men personally. Now, why did they simply pray? In Mark 9:29 Jesus said that the worst demons will only come

out by prayer. Prayer is the most powerful way to deal with a demon. We do not need to be afraid of them. Victory is not achieved by commanding demons to leave in Jesus’ name! All that we need to do is pray and God will fight the battle for deliverance.

Now why did I share these experiences? I want to make the point that demonic activity is real. It was real in Pergamum and it is real here in the United States. I believe it is increasing, but we do not need to be afraid. We only need to pray.

*Hold Fast My Name and Did Not Deny My Faith.* The second point is that Jesus praised them for holding fast His name and not denying the faith. The statement “you hold fast My name and did not deny My faith” is significant. These believers were living in a very demonic city; yet, they remained faithful to Jesus!

*Antipas My Witness — My Martyr.* Then Jesus’ third point was that there was a man in the church by the name of Antipas who had been martyred in this city. I say martyred because the Greek word for “witness” in this verse is *martys*, from which we get “martyr.” History gives conflicting information about this man. Eusebius, an early church father, says that he was the pastor at Pergamum and was put to death by priests from the temple of Asclepius.<sup>6</sup> Tradition says he was burned to death in a brazen altar that was shaped like a bull. Whatever is the correct answer, Jesus says Antipas was faithful in this demonic place until death. The point of this praise is to prepare the church for Jesus’ rebuke in verses 14-15!

**PROBLEMS OF THE HEART REVEALED.** Verses 14-15 describe a serious problem. The church is beginning to look like the culture. Jesus said,

**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. Revelation 2:14 (NASB)**

We are told that there were “a few things” that Jesus held against this church. The first problem that we are given in this

6. McClintock and Strong. *Cyclopedia of Biblical Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*. 1887, vol. A-B. p. 202. p. 276.

verse was that they held to the teaching of Balaam. The Greek tense of the word “hold” is a present participle which refers to ongoing activity. That is, some of the individuals in the church were habitually holding on to the teaching of Balaam. It was what they believed.

*First False Teaching — Teaching of Balaam.* So what is the teaching of Balaam? Numbers 22-25 and Numbers 31 are the two important Old Testament passages that help us. They are about Balaam. Numbers 22-25 tell us that Balak, the king of the Amorites, had asked the prophet Balaam to curse the nation of Israel because he was afraid of Israel. The Israelites had defeated his nation earlier. So Balak asked Balaam three

times to curse Israel, each time God told Balaam to not do that. Consequently, Balaam did not curse Israel and Balak was upset.

What happened next is revealed in Numbers 25:1-3 and Numbers 31:15-16. We are told that Balaam advised Balak to

have the daughters of Moab seduce the men of Israel. Numbers 25:1-3 tells us that Balaam’s teaching worked. Here is Numbers 25:1,

**While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. Numbers 25:1 (NASB)**

That is, the Moabite daughters started acting like prostitutes with the men of Israel. That was step one! Have sex with the men and keep doing it. The idea is simple, develop a relationship with the men that way and then verse 2 tells us . . .

**. . . they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the**

**people ate and bowed down to their gods. Numbers 25:2 (NASB)**

So, the Moabite daughters invited the men to make sacrifices to their gods and worship them. Verse 3 reveals the men and others started worshipping Baal. The plan worked. Just as the Moabite daughters seduced the men of Israel, some Christians in the church in Pergamum believed it was okay to be seduced by unbelievers in this demonic city. That was step one of Balaam’s plan! Step two is to later visit their temple. Some believed that was okay! Today it would be like dating someone who followed Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or some other cult or false religion. It seems safe, just join the person

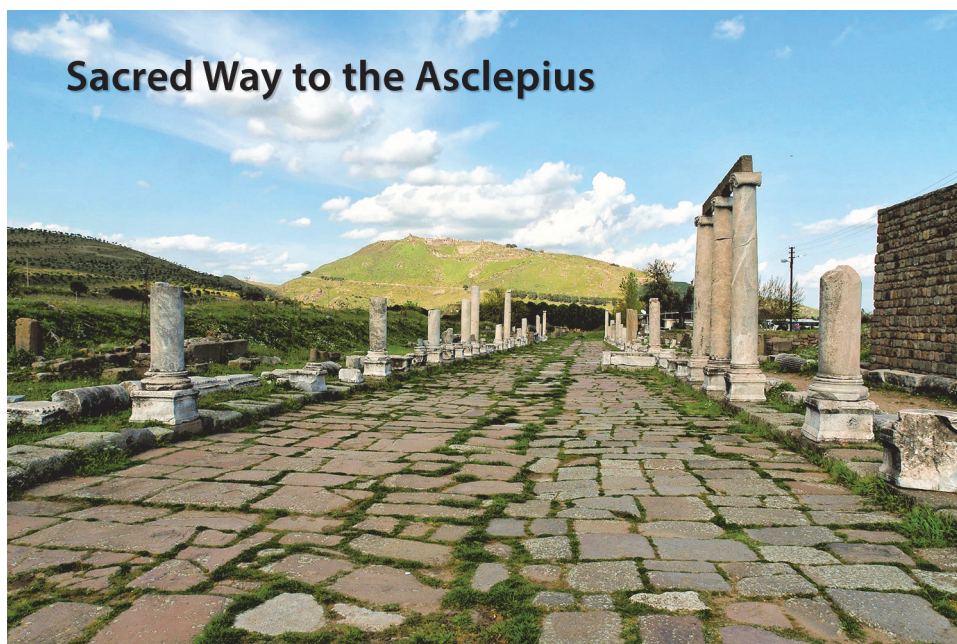
one time. Then it becomes a habit. It is amazing how easily we are influenced by someone we like! But the root problem was the acceptance of false teaching or wrong belief!

Why is it wrong belief? 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 warns every Christian

man and woman to not have a relationship with an unbeliever. Do not date them, engage in sex with them, or marry them. The passage says,

**Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial [or Satan], or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 2 Corinthians 6:14-15 (NASB)**

Notice that we are told a believer is not to be bound to an unbeliever. Verse 25 says harmony will not exist in the relationship. Trouble is coming! Marriage is difficult enough at times with-



out being married to an unbeliever. After the physical attraction disappears, pain and disappointments eventually come, and may result in divorce. In addition, the Christian will not be wholly devoted to God. 1 Corinthians 7:39 warns Christians to only marry in the Lord or only marry other Christians. Scripture also teaches us that sexual relations outside of marriage is a sin. The usual problem is that believers do not understand the danger, become emotionally involved and then it is very difficult to pull away. A woman once told me that when the kissing starts, the thinking stops!

1 Kings 11:1-4 gives us an example of what can happen when a believer marries an unbeliever. The passage says,

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations

concerning which the LORD had said to the sons of Israel,

“You shall not associate with them, nor shall they associate with you, for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.”

Solomon held fast to these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. 1 Kings 11:1-4 (NASB)

Now notice that King Solomon ignored the Lord’s command when he married these women. He disobeyed and

sinned. He may have thought that he could handle the situation and remain faithful to God. Whatever he thought, he married them because he wanted them. Eventually, his wives and concubines influenced him to worship their idols. This helps us understand that God is wise! He gives us commands such as this for a reason. He loves us and is trying to protect us!

*Second False Teaching — Teaching of the Nicolaitans.* The second problem in this church was another false teaching. Verse 15 says.

So, you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Revelation 2:15 (NASB)

Here we are told some in the church also held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. The verse says the teaching is similar to the teaching of Balaam, but it is not very clear. The early church father, Irenaeus, says the teacher

of this heresy was Nicholas, one of the first deacons mentioned in Acts 6:5. Irenaeus says that Nicholas said it was okay for Christians to live as you desire. They believed they were free to live lives of unrestrained indulgence<sup>7</sup> because their sins were forgiven. They had their ticket to heaven, so do whatever you desire!

Sadly, that describes what is increasingly happening today. For example, the online Christian Post website has stated that the Christian Mingle dating service has reported . . .

. . . 61 percent of Christians said they would have sex before

7. Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. 4.20.11. Ante-Nicene Fathers. Hendrickson. 1995. vol. 1, p. 352.



Ruins – Altar of Zeus

marriage. Fifty-six percent said that it's appropriate to move in with someone after dating for a time between six months and two years . . . And 34 percent responded that while it would be nice to marry someone of the same faith, it is not required.<sup>8</sup>

There is another trend that is alarming! The Barna Group, a Christian organization, published a more recent article on pornography in 2016 titled, "The Porn Phenomenon."<sup>9</sup> In the article, the report states that at least 1 in 4 Christian men and at least 1 in 20 Christian women seek out porn monthly. That is not accidentally seeing it; that is seeking it out.

These are amazingly bad statistics. These and other statistics reveal that increasingly Christians are becoming like the world. Here is something to think about. In ancient Pergamum and other cities, the worship of the god Dionysus required a person to be a member. The society would vote on a person's admission. Members made monthly donations and had a moral code. The priest led the worship service. They sang songs. Some of the lyrics have been published. The priest determined who spoke. When I first read that, I realized that is very similar to what we do in church. Do you wonder why they attended their society weekly? Why do you attend church? Are you here because of friends? Are you here because it is a duty? Maybe you like the singing? Maybe the preaching? But isn't the real question, "Do you want to worship the true God in spirit and truth?" Why did the Israelite men worship Baal? Jesus tells us why some Christians in Pergamum liked what the culture outside of the church was doing. They liked worshipping at some of the temples and at the church in Pergamum. They tried to add the culture that is in the power of the evil one (1 John 5:18) and Jesus together.

For Christians, it all boils down to our heart—our first love! Jesus said that if you love Him, you will want to keep His commandments (John 14:15). Then you will become a godly man or woman. That is, loving Jesus and having correct doctrine is essential so that we know how to live a godly life. Hebrews 5:14 says that the one who feasts on solid doctrine understands right from wrong. A person who is on a diet of milk will struggle

to understand what is right and what is wrong. They will have difficulty understanding that idol worship is both a head problem and a heart problem. Colossians 3:5 appeals to our mind when it says,

**Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. Colossians 3:5 (NASB)**

This passage helps us understand that the false teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans actually appealed to the idols in our hearts. Our flesh wants these things. 2 Peter 2:17-20 reveals that is exactly to what false teachers appeal. False teaching can sound great. It promises freedom, but the result is we move away from Jesus.

**PERSONAL REPENTANCE IS NEEDED TO AVOID DISCIPLINE.** So how should we respond? Jesus says repent! Verse 13 says,

**Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. Revelation 2:16 (NASB)**

The word "repent" means more than "I am sorry for my sin." It also means to change directions, to make a 180 degree turn and stop doing what you were doing. That is real repentance. We do it to restore our relationship with God.

I have a small wood shop in my garage. I have numerous different kinds of wood. I have discovered that sin is like water dropping on a piece of wood. The first drop of water does almost nothing to the wood. But if I let the water continue dropping, the wood will begin to warp. If I were to let that continue over months, that wood would eventually rot. That describes what sin does to us. What is the message of this illustration? The first sin is a sin; but if we confess it, we can quickly restore relationship with Christ. But if we continue sinning and not repenting and confessing our sin, we start to become warped. Scripture says we can have a hardened heart, an insensitive heart to sin, to the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit.

So, Jesus says repent. We are to confess our sins and turn away from our sin. Repentance includes abandoning false

8. Tyler O'Neil. "Christians Are Following Secular Trends in Premarital Sex, Cohabitation Outside of Marriage, Says Dating Site Survey." The Christian Post. January 27, 2014. (online article)

9. Josh McDowell Ministries. The Porn Phenomenon. Barna Group. February 5, 2016. (online article)

beliefs and behaving differently! That restores the relationship with God. Then we will walk by the Spirit and begin to have victory over sin!

The second reason to repent is to avoid Jesus' discipline. Notice that Jesus warned the leaders to do something. When Jesus said, "I am coming to you," He was speaking to the church leaders. He was encouraging them to take action. First, they were to correct the false teaching by teaching the truth. That is one great reason for this passage of Scripture and for this lesson. If necessary, they would need to do church discipline as described in Matthew 18:15-18. Then notice that Jesus spoke to the

individuals who were sinning. He said repent or I will make war with you with My two-edged sword. He would discipline them. Maybe Jesus even meant that He would take their lives. 1 John 5:17 does say there is a sin leading to death. Whatever the right answer is, they need to

understand biblical truth and hold on to it—obey it.

Now, I want to help anyone who is struggling with any of these sins or has struggled with any of these sins in the past. If you are a Christian, the first step is to do what Jesus said—repent. Confess your sins and turn away from your sin toward Jesus. 1 John 1:9 says that the Father will forgive. It says,

*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9 (NASB)*

The verse says that because God is faithful and righteous, He

will forgive you and me. This is a promise. Psalm 103:12 says,

*As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.  
Psalm 103:12 (NASB)*

So, ask God to forgive you and then thank Him for forgiving you!

**THE REWARDS.** Then Jesus ends on a positive note. He always does in these messages of warning! Verse 17 is a promise of reward for every Christian.



**The Dyonsius Theater**

*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 2:17*

(NASB)

*The Manna.* The term overcomers refers to Christians (1 John 5:4). Then Jesus said He will give Christians hidden manna. What is the hidden manna? The answer is found in John 6:48 where Jesus referred to Himself as the bread of life or manna. Jesus is saying to the believers in Pergamum that they did not need to seek happiness from one of the gods or goddesses. 1 John 5:19 reminds us that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. That included the occultic centers of worship! Satan promises pleasure, but it is not real, lasting pleasure!

Matthew 5:6 tells how to have real satisfaction. The verse says,

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Matthew 5:6 (NASB)*

Jesus says that if you seek satisfaction, then do not seek it. Yet, that is what we do! We buy something that we think will make us happy, but the happiness is brief. People, in effect, rewrite the verse to read like this, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for satisfaction, for they shall be satisfied.” We seek satisfaction in order to be satisfied. But Jesus says hunger and thirst to be righteous. That is how we find true joy and satisfaction.

*White Stone and the New Name.* The meaning of the white stone is uncertain, and we do not know the name. No one knows. Some day we will know the name. I am sure it will be magnificent.

**CONCLUSION.** So, Jesus encouraged the leaders and everyone in this church to teach and hold to sound doctrine. That is the emphasis of this passage. Jesus called them to have ears that hear. He wants us to know the truth so that we can then obey it. Jesus is calling us to be real Christians in a dark world. We are to be lights in the world, and there are great rewards for our faithfulness!