

How to Maintain Truth

Text:

Revelation 2:2-12-17

"And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. "'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and 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 the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Introduction:

Pergamum, located about fifteen miles inland and forty miles north of Sardis is described in this letter as the place "where Satan's throne is." It was a former royal city, and at the time this letter was written it was the center of both Roman administration and Emperor worship in the province of Asia. Located in the Caicus River valley it was impressive in appearance. There was the lower city on the plain, and rising above it was an acropolis which rose to 1300 feet above sea level covered with temples and government administrative buildings.

Emperor worship in the province of Asia had originated in Pergamum when they had constructed a temple in honor of the first Emperor, Augustus, in 29 B.C. Later they would add temples in honor of Trajan and Severus. As an administrative center and a center of Emperor worship, it had become a center of Christian persecution. This short letter refers to the first victim of Roman persecution, Antipas, but there had, no doubt, been many more since that time. Even more than Sardis, the church of Pergamum had known persecution, and it had passed the test holding fast to its faith in Christ, not denying him.

Even in their faithfulness in persecution, however, they were not faultless. As in his message to Ephesus, after commending them, Christ adds: “But I have a few things against you”. The verb that indicates their commendation also indicates their condemnation. If that had “held fast” his name during persecution, they had also allowed a minority to “hold to” the doctrines of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. It is impossible to establish exactly what this false teaching was. What is indicated in the letter, itself, is that involved violating two of the prohibitions specifically established by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: to eat food offered to idols, and to practice sexual immorality. Beyond this we can only speculate, but this really isn’t necessary. What is important for us to understand is not so much what the false teaching was, but the attitude of the Risen Christ towards truth and error.

Christ had commended the Ephesian Church for dealing with error, for ridding itself of false teachers and false teaching. He warns the Pergamum Church for not doing the same. We saw that the problem for Ephesus was that in their zeal for truth they had wandered from love, but this does not mean that their zeal for truth was wrong. Pergamum, like Sardis is congratulated for its faithfulness to Christ, but is warned that it must do like Ephesus and rid itself of false teachers and false teaching. Why is this so important? This is the question for which we seek an answer as we look at this short letter. Why is it so important that we maintain truth? How can we do it? Can we do it without straying from love as Ephesus had?

This is an important discussion because we live in a time when Christian truth, along with all other religious truth, has, for the most part, been relegated to the realm of the personal. Popular opinion would have us to believe that what’s spiritually true for me is only true for me, and that something entirely different can be true for someone else. The objective truth of what we believe is not what’s important, but only its pragmatic results. If my beliefs enable me to cope with life then they must be good for me. Religion belongs only to the realm of the personal; it has no place in the public forum. The individual rules, and each individual is free to design his or her own personal belief system. Jesus is entirely opposed to such thinking as our study of this text and the rest of the New Testament will demonstrate.

To help us think about why it is important for us to distinguish between truth and error, and to make every effort to eliminate error and to hold to the truth we need to reflect seriously on the following concepts:

- The Nature of Truth
- The Necessity of Truth
- The Nurture of Truth

I. The Nature of Truth

Spiritual truth, God's truth, truth that leads to salvation is not something that we discover on our own. It comes to us from the outside. We know God because he speaks to us; because he has made himself known to us. Since this truth comes from God, and God is unchangeable, it remains unalterable. We may gain greater insight into it, we may perceive it more precisely, but we cannot add to it. Furthermore, as Christians we believe that the summit of this revelation is Jesus Christ. In becoming incarnate God has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ in a way that can never be abrogated or surpassed. This is the reason Jesus can say of himself: "I am the way the truth and the life" (John 14:6), and Paul can say simply: "The truth is in Jesus" (Eph. 4:21). Knowing truth in a way that leads to salvation is never the result of human investigation, but of God's gracious revelation. Since Christian truth is not a human enterprise succeeding generations do not add to it, but maintain it and transmit it. We make progress in the truth through prayer and discipleship more than by research and scholarship. The primary instrument for receiving it is a humble and obedient heart. It is a gift for which we give thanks; not something which we have acquired on our own over which we reign.

To know Christ is to know the truth, and all that is not of Christ is to be rejected. The Christians of Pergamum were fighting a battle that continues to the present, the battle of syncretism. When we come to Christ, we come from somewhere, and we come with baggage. The 1st century believers of Pergamum had a world view, a set of values that they had absorbed from the environment that had formed them. The New Testament calls that environment the world, and it calls on believers to reject the world; to put off the world and put on Christ. This means that we must examine all of our beliefs and values under the light of Christ. All that is not according to Christ is to be put off and replaced with Christ. When we fail to do this we mix the truth of Christ with our own error and the result is always something less than Christian. It was in Pergamum, and it still is for us. Christ may seem severe in his judgment in this passage, but it is because he knows the danger.

II. The Necessity of Truth

The danger is that only the truth works. Jesus is "the way the truth and the life", and no one comes to the father except by him. To miss the truth that is in Christ is to forfeit life. On another occasion Jesus said: "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). No verse of the Bible has been more often turned into a slogan foreign to its original intent. Jesus was not promoting education. The truth of which he was speaking was the truth of which we are speaking; the truth that is revealed in him. Only the truth of Christ liberates.

To know Christ is to know truth and freedom and salvation. The purer our knowledge of Christ, the greater our freedom.

The truth can be absent or hidden in more than one way. It can be simply be absent. Many are ignorant of Christ, hence ignorant of God's truth. They cannot know God's freedom and salvation because they do not know Christ. To others the truth is hidden through adulteration. History teaches us that Christ has often been made out to be what he is not. We are not free to remake him to our own liking, to reinvent him to fit our fancy. He is, and it is encountering him as he is that he becomes our powerful savior. Therefore, we must always resist the temptation to make him fit in with us. It is rather for us to conform to him. He is the truth and only the truth can save. He is the truth and only the truth gives hope. Therefore we must carefully examine ourselves to make sure that we are not present day Nicolaitans; guilty of adulterating the truth revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

III. The Nurture of Truth

As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to nurture the truth that he has revealed. We do this in two ways. Negatively, we are called, as were the believers of Pergamum, to eliminate that which is not according to Christ. To do this requires first of all a true knowledge of Christ in order that we might recognize that which is contrary to him. Just as a wife who truly know her husband might not purchase a particular item of clothing for him, saying to herself: "that is not him." So a Christian who truly knows Christ and the truth that God has revealed in him when presented with teachings and ideas foreign to him will reject them saying to herself: "that's not him".

Christians hate error like doctors hate disease. They hate it because they see the damage it to human lives. We are called to "speak the truth in love". The truth that we speak is the truth of Christ, and the love with which we speak it is the love of Christ. We must not be like the believers of Ephesus who in their zeal for truth strayed from love, but neither can we be like the believers of Pergamum who tolerated those who taught error.

As I stated at the beginning, the truth of Christ is learned in discipleship. The pursuit of the truth of Christ is never a purely academic pursuit. It is a life lived in light of the life of Christ, in light of all of the light that he has brought into the world. It is "walking in the light as he is in the light." It is not so much knowing the truth, as "doing the truth". Those who know the light, and who walk in the light will reject the darkness. All that does not pass the test of "according to Christ" must be put off. Paul says "a little leaven leavens the whole lump". Therefore we

must put out the leaven, that which is contrary to Christ and his gospel in order that we might walk in his truth and fulfill our mission of being the light of the world.

Conclusion:

Christ says that if the false teachers are not put out he will: “come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth”. It is interesting that our word polemics comes from the Greek word for war that is used in this passage. Polemics is in Theology the defense of Christian doctrine against error and heresy. We are to use the two-edged sword of the Word of God to expose and eliminate all teaching that is contrary to the truth of the gospel of Christ. If we fail to do it Christ will. It is his church and the gate of hell will not prevail against it.

