

(The Lord and His Church) 6. the Worldly Church

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen's sermon emphasizes the need for the church to remain faithful and pure amidst worldly influences, using the example of the church in Pergamum and the martyrdom of Antipas as a call to stand firm in faith.

Scripture: Exodus 16:33, John 12:48, Acts 20:28, Ephesians 6:17, Hebrews 10:20, 1 Peter 5:8, Revelation 2:12

Topics: "Church Compromise", "Spiritual Decline"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches about the church in Pergamum, commended for holding fast to the faith amidst persecution, especially highlighting the faithful witness of Antipas who stood uncompromisingly for God's truth. However, after Antipas' death, the church declined spiritually, succumbing to the teachings of Balaam and Nicolaitans, leading to worldliness and idolatry within. Poonen emphasizes the importance of standing firm in faith, even in the face of opposition, and warns against tolerating sin and compromise within the church, urging repentance and a return to God's truth.

Transcript

"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. 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. 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 2:12-17).

Light in Pitch Darkness

The Lord describes Himself here as the One Who has the sharp two-edged sword of the Spirit - God's living and powerful Word (verse 12; Ephesians 6:17). This was the sword with which He overcame Satan in the wilderness, when He was on earth. This sword still comes out of His mouth today. And this is the

weapon that we need for our battles against Satan as well.

Pergamum was a city which was so evil that the Lord says that Satan had his earthly headquarters there. This is mentioned twice in verse 13. And right in the midst of that city the Lord had placed His church.

The Lord tells them, "I know where you dwell". He knows exactly where we are living, and in what circumstances we are living. And He can keep us pure and triumphant, even if Satan has his earthly throne right where we live. With the sword of the Spirit we too can overcome.

No lampstand ever complains that the surroundings are too dark for it to shine in. The brightness of a lampstand has nothing to do with its surroundings. Its light depends solely on the amount of oil it contains.

It is exactly the same with any local church. The surroundings may be evil. Satan may have his throne in that city. But if the church is filled with the oil of the Holy Spirit, the light will shine brightly. In fact, the darker the surroundings, the more brightly any light will be seen in such surroundings! The stars are seen at night - not during the day.

The Lord commends this church for holding fast His Name and not denying the faith even in times of persecution. He specially mentions Antipas, who was a faithful witness who laid down his life for his faith.

Antipas was one who stood for God's truth, even if it meant having to stand alone. He was a man of conviction and not one who sought to please men. Those who know God do not have to look around to see how many others believe what they believe. They are willing to stand alone for the Lord, if necessary against everyone else in the whole world. Antipas was a man like that. And as a result he was killed.

If he had been a man-pleaser, he could have escaped death. He was killed because he stood uncompromisingly for God's revealed truth. People probably called him narrow-minded, stubborn, hard-to-get-along-with and insane. But it made no difference to him. He just stood true to his Lord, standing against all sin, worldliness, compromise, disobedience to God's Word and against the devil. Here was a man who was a threat to Satan's kingdom.

Perhaps it was because Antipas was in Pergamum that Satan decided to place his throne there. What a man Antipas must have been if even Satan dreaded him!

God needs people like Antipas in every part of the world today. The time is soon coming when we will have to pay a price for our faith. All of Babylonian Christendom around us will compromise and bow to the Antichrist. Will we stand firm in that day, like Antipas did? Or will we bow the knee to Satan to preserve our life? Are we convinced that it is worth losing our life for the sake of God's truth?

Today, God is testing us through little trials. It is only if we are faithful in these little testings that we can be faithful in the bigger trials that will come in the future. Satan should consider you such a threat to his kingdom that he moves his throne to the town where you live.

Decline after Antipas' Death

The sad thing was that the church at Pergamum lost out spiritually, after Antipas died. Antipas was probably the messenger of the church when he was alive. When he died, someone else took over and the church went downhill. This is the sad history of many churches.

When Paul was leaving Ephesus, he told the elders there that he knew that after his departure, the church there would compromise and backslide (Acts 20:28-31). As long as Paul was there he fought against worldliness and sin and kept the spirit of the antichrist at bay. But there wasn't anyone strong enough in Ephesus to do that after Paul left. And so the wolves got in among the flock and devoured the sheep freely, while the elders stood by and watched!

Satan changed his tactics at Pergamum, after Antipas died. The fact that Satan's throne is in a place does not necessarily mean that he will always attack the church with persecution.

He is described in the Scriptures, not only as a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), but also as a wily serpent who transforms himself into an angel of light Revelation 12:9; 2 Corinthians 11:14). He has found through the centuries that he accomplishes his purposes far better by corrupting the church with worldliness from within than by persecuting it from without.

This is what he finally did at Pergamum through "Balaamism" - and thus he succeeded, where he did not succeed with persecution!

The Teaching of Balaam

The Lord tells the church here, "You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam" (verse 14). Balaam was one who was hired by King Balak to curse the Israelites. He was the first of the "hired preachers" that we read of in the Bible.

Christendom is flooded with these hirelings today, for whom preaching is a means of earning a living. God is against such hirelings, who pretend to be shepherds of God's flock, but who are interested only in fleecing the sheep.

Balaam did not go when Balak called him at first, because God specifically told him not to go. But when Balak offered a higher pay and greater honour, then Balaam "sought God's will again" - just like many do today, in similar circumstances !! God allowed Balaam to go after money, and to destroy himself thereby. And God allows many Christian preachers today also to follow in Balaam's footsteps and finally to come to Balaam's end.

When Balaam saw that he could not curse Israel, he suggested to Balak that the Israelites be corrupted by tempting them to immorality and idolatry (Numbers 24 & 25). Thus Balaam succeeded in getting God Himself to punish them.

That was how Satan succeeded at Pergamum too. He knew he could not overcome the church, until the church became worldly in some way. So he corrupted the church from within. Thus the church became ineffective in its witness for the Lord and also in its battle against Satan.

"If you can't beat them, join them", has been Satan's motto in relation to the church. And thus he has succeeded in destroying the witness of many churches throughout these twenty centuries.

Idolatry and immorality were the two sins that God condemned the most throughout the Old Testament. And these are the two that he condemns even today. According to new-covenant standards, to be greedy, or to worship money or one's profession or a person or anything earthly is idolatry. And to lust after a woman with one's eyes is immorality. To compare your wife unfavourably with someone else's wife in any area is to "covet your neighbour's wife". This too is immorality.

Where these new-covenant standards are not consistently preached in a church, hidden idolatry and immorality will prevail among its members and the church will soon become like the one at Pergamum.

When worldliness overtook the church at Pergamum, the sad thing is that the messenger of the church just watched it happen and did nothing about it. Many elders are just as powerless today against worldliness that has come in like a flood into their churches.

The messenger in Pergamum had not himself succumbed to the doctrine of Balaam. There were only "some" in Pergamum who had fallen a prey to it. But the messenger was guilty in that he had not rebuked the worldliness that had come into the church. This is where he had failed.

The reason for his failure must have been that he had not judged such worldliness severely in his own thoughts. We can have authority in the church only over those things that we have crucified in our own flesh. It is when we treat sin and worldliness lightly in our own lives that we become tolerant of it in the lives of others in the church as well. What looks like a "merciful" attitude on the part of an elder towards a worldly person in his church is usually dictated by the fact that there is unjudged worldliness in the heart of the elder himself.

The messenger at Pergamum was so lax about worldly teachings that he even permitted the teaching of the Nicolaitans to flourish in his church (verse 15). Priestcraft was being taught as a doctrine by some in the church at Pergamum! And the messenger had done nothing about it. That was another thing that the Lord held against him.

The Lord warns him and the church to repent. If they don't, He says that He will judge them with the sword of His mouth (verse 16). It is by His Word that God judges us. Jesus said that we would all be judged in the final day by the word that He has spoken to us (John 12:48). Our lives will be compared with the words of God that we have heard, and we will be judged thereby.

The Call to the Overcomer

The overcomer is then promised the reward of the hidden manna and a white stone with a new name written on it (verse 17).

In the Old Testament, Moses was told to hide some of the manna that fell from heaven inside the ark, in the most holy place of the tabernacle (Exodus 16:33, 34). While manna that was kept by the Israelites in their tents began to stink within 24 hours (Exodus 16:19, 20), the "hidden manna" in the ark remained fresh throughout the 40 years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. Such is the power of God's presence in the most holy place to keep us fresh, if we live there before His face at all times.

The most holy place can be entered only through the rent veil of the flesh (Hebrews 10:20). This is the way that Jesus inaugurated through His flesh for us. If we walk on this new and living way, we can receive the hidden manna that God gives - revelation from His Word and fellowship with Him. And our lives will always carry the fragrance of the freshness of the Lord.

The hidden precious stone with the overcomer's name written on it (verse 17) speaks of an intimate relationship with the Lord such as a bride has with her bridegroom. This is the spiritual equivalent of the engagement ring (with an expensive precious stone and a name engraved on it) that worldly men give their fiancées.

The bridegroom calls the bride by an intimate name that no-one else knows (verse 17). Bridal intimacy with the Lord is a reward that is promised to all who overcome.

The average believer has a dry and boring relationship with Christ, because he is not radical in his hatred of sin and worldliness. But the true overcomer enters into a spiritually ecstatic relationship with his Lord such as a bride has with her bridegroom with whom she is deeply in love. This is the type of relationship described in the "Song of Solomon" - and only an overcomer can understand it fully and experience the reality of it.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/zac-poonen/the-lord-and-his-church-6-the-worldly-church/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net