

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## God's Message to Seven Churches: Pergamos: Rebuke/Warning

*But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. (Revelation 2:14–16, KJV 1900)*

A study of the Balaam lesson in the Old Testament is always fascinating and instructive. The lesson begins in Numbers 22 and continues through several chapters. The casual student of Scripture might think that Balaam was a prophet of the Lord, but he wasn't. He was a pagan mercenary prophet. He seemed to have a reputation for selling his prophecies to the highest bidder. However, when Balak tried to buy a curse against Israel, God interfered with the transaction. When direct curses failed, it appears that Balaam suggested that Balak direct his people to initiate a deceitful friendliness with Israel, including encouraging their young women to marry young Israelite men. Where direct curses failed, deceit worked, and Israel suffered. The pagan women married Israelite men and soon started working to entice their new husbands to follow them in their pagan worship. That is the point the Holy Spirit makes in our study passage.

A favorite tactic of false teachers is deceit, in this case through calculated personal relationships. They cannot openly and clearly convince sincere believers to leave Scripture through plain explanations of their errors, so they speak with vague and carefully crafted terms to make their error sound like truth. If a man who is quite articulate inexplicably starts routinely talking about his beliefs in vague or difficult to understand terms, take note. A wise person once described her reaction to these "Uncertain sounds" as a "Zinger" flying over her head. The false teacher will speak much truth that you accept, but will occasionally throw out pieces of his error, hoping that you won't notice. The more you accept the "Zingers" without reaction the more "Zingers" the teacher of error will throw at you. The Holy Spirit's rebuke of Pergamos focuses on the deceitful practices of false teachers that were apparently part of the church.

We often refer to Biblical teachings as "Doctrine," occasionally reserving this term for eternal truths related to God's purpose in election and eternal salvation, while using "Practice" to refer to our behaviors in time. Using the two terms in this way, a cliché occasionally surfaces, "Wrong creed-wrong conduct" or "Wrong belief-wrong practice." What one believes about God and the teachings of

Scripture invariably weaves its way into a person's attitudes and behaviors. You can't believe error and behave rightly. It is this firm union between our belief and our conduct that likely explains why Scripture almost always weaves "Doctrine" and "Practice," belief and conduct, together into a single fabric, as contrasted with our common topical way of studying or thinking about one or the other.

Consider the common attitude in contemporary Christian circles regarding the Bible's teachings of "Eschatology," the doctrines of final things or the last chapter of time. As the popular ideas of dispensationalism have taken root over less than two hundred years,<sup>1</sup> these ideas have sowed intense emotional polarization in the minds of many Christians. You either join the dispensational parade, or you are the "Enemy." A growing number of contemporary pastors in many denominations today have opted simply to omit any teaching or preaching on the Second Coming or end times because they want to avoid the controversy. In fact, as I believe Scripture strongly teaches, there is a link between what people believe and how they live, this knowing avoidance of such a major Bible doctrine shall have a monumental impact on the behavior of Christian people who find themselves under such teaching. Imagine the state of the Corinthian Church, had Paul simply chosen to ignore their rejection of the doctrine of the resurrection, meaning that they rejected both the

<sup>1</sup> Modern dispensationalism had its beginnings around 1827-30 with J. N. Darby. Darby's teachings were rejected by most historical Christians through the remainder of the nineteenth century. Only with the publication of the Scofield Bible, ca 1917, did dispensationalism gain support among mainline Christian people. This teaching is quite different from—and in many ways contradictory to—historical millennial beliefs. Without investigating this speculative belief system, I observe that the dispensational view is simply about eighteen hundred years too young to claim New Testament support. And I categorically reject the idea that the Holy Spirit who directed the writing of Scripture sat idly by for that long time and allowed believers to believe error.

historical fact of Jesus' personal, literal, bodily resurrection, as well as their future resurrection, equally literal and bodily. Christian doctrine void of the resurrection eventually degenerates into a good moral philosophy, but little more.

No doubt Balaam threw out many suggestions to Balak and his subjects that would seem harmless and inviting to young Israelite men, but the product of this action proved anything but harmless and inviting. A church that is willing to turn the deaf ear and the blind eye to errant teachings is a church in danger of the Lord's severe judgments. The Lord's description of Himself at the beginning of this letter, He "...which hath the sharp sword with two edges..." is altogether fitting for such a church. His words, spoken through the Holy Spirit's inspired writings of Scripture, are not mere words written by yet another ancient philosopher. The human writers wrote as the Holy Spirit directed them, so that the words we read in Scripture are not the personal philosophies of so many ancient sages. They are in fact the words of God, "...as though God did beseech you by us..." (2 Corinthians 5:20) When we refuse to believe or to obey the teachings of Scripture, we refuse the very words of God to us. The sword that slices through the adversaries of the faithful also has another edge, just as sharp and just as effective against people inside a church that promote error. God doesn't always work on our timetable, but never doubt that He works, and He works faithfully against Balaam-like false teachers. When He takes up that sword against them, they shall fall as surely as the false teachers who were trying to deceive the faithful at Pergamos.

*So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.* We examined this question in our study of the Holy Spirit's letter to the Church at Ephesus. There the Holy Spirit warned the Ephesians against "...the deeds..." of the Nicolaitans. (Revelation 2:6) Here He warns the Pergamos Church against the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. This is a perfect example of the link between "Doctrine" and "Deeds." Corruption in one inevitably leads to corruption in the other.

If the Nicolaitan error, as discussed in our study of John's (actually the Holy Spirit's, letter. John was the stenographer. The letters, as the whole Book of Revelation, was as much to John as to those seven churches) letter to the Church at Ephesus, was an attitude of ministerial superiority, we have a powerful warning against such attitudes. I find it quite revealing to observe how frequently the false teacher claims that "The Lord revealed to me..." as he conditions people for the details of his error. What he can't prove convincingly by Scripture he conveniently claims that the Holy Spirit revealed something to him that He didn't reveal to anyone else on the scene. Whenever someone tells me "The Holy Spirit revealed this to me," I want to ask him, "Prove to me that it was the Holy Spirit. Prove to me by Scripture that your 'revelation' came from the Holy Spirit, for He who inspired the writing of

Scripture is the unchangeable God who doesn't change His mind. If your 'Revelation' is not provable by Scripture, rightly divided and rightly applied, you may well have received a revelation, but it didn't come from the Holy Spirit." What a convenient way to promote the self-superior position of the Nicolaitans; claim that your error actually came from the Holy Spirit. In categorical rejection of the ministerial superiority Nicolaitan sinful attitude, Peter directs the spiritual leaders who read his inspired letter to avoid being "...**lords over** God's heritage..." choosing rather to lead by being "...ensamples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:1-3)

*Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.* As entrenched in error as this church was, the Holy Spirit warns and encourages—in the same words—the church to repent. Repentance brings forgiveness, healing, and a restoration of the Lord's blessings. Failure to repent will bring certain and severe judgment. While the warnings are severe, they are also quite accurate and specific. The Lord threatens to send the sword of his mouth against those who taught and accepted these errors, not against the whole church, particularly not against those who had held fast against these errors. Human judgments often punish the innocent with the guilty. The Lord's judgments are not so limited. He can swing the "Sword" of His mouth with precision, cutting the offenders and false teachers, while protecting the faithful.

The Lord's reference to the "...sword of my mouth..." in this warning against false teachers should serve as a powerful encouragement to those who remain faithfully steadfast in their faith. While the false teacher relies on his own self-deluded ideas of self-superiority in intellect and faith over others and his "The Lord revealed to me..." he thinks himself in competition against other people. In fact, he faces a far more formidable adversary. The Lord Himself, "...sword of mouth..." poised and sharpened, shall face and defeat the promoters of error. At times the Lord may use one of His faithful servants as His "Sword," and at other times He may intervene more personally. Regardless, we must live with the reminder that we serve in the Lord's church, and He wields the "sword" of His mouth. By our faithfulness or failures, we shall witness the protection of that sword or the judgment of it. In the end, truth does not rely on human powers to survive or fail. The Lord who said, "I am...the truth..." is active and jealously protects and preserves His truth against any who compromise or oppose it from either within or without.

What does the Lord require of you and me in times when error rises to threaten the Lord's truth? It is simple. "Be thou faithful unto death." In personal relationships, Scripture urges the spirit of sweet reasonableness. In the truth of the gospel, those same Scriptures command steadfastness in the faith. The winsome personality of the false teacher is irrelevant. Be faithful to the Lord!

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor