

10,22,20 The Spiritual Formation of the End Time Remnant (Part 4)

Before we go into the next section in Rev. ch. 2, something got my attention recently when I was reading a Sparks article. It's a principle that, in a sense, bottom-lines *all* the overcomer characteristics in *all* seven letters.

He based his comments on 1 Cor. 4:2; "It is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful."

"I believe that the greatest virtue in the eyes of God is faithfulness; it embraces everything. Faithfulness is after God's own heart. Take a passing glance at this steward – Paul the Apostle. "Demas forsook me..."; (2 Tim. 4:10); "...all that are in Asia turned away from me..." (2 Tim. 1:15). Look at him when everything which would inspire to faithfulness is breaking down. He is left practically alone. He has more enemies than ever. And now the tragedy is that so many of his enemies are those to whom he had been most used. The very people for whom he has spent himself have become his enemies. But there is no thought, no hint, no suggestion of giving up. His word is, "...faithful unto death...." (just like we saw in Smyrna). Paul was faithful. You cannot say that, when he died, the situation outwardly testified to tremendous success. It did not look like that at all. Paul's life was not vindicated up to the hilt. No! He died largely a lonely man, but faithful. But what enrichment of others may follow from the meeting of that requirement, costly as it is. I only hope that Paul knows of all that has sprung from his ministry, all that his ministry means to us. The Lord has met us through His servant, and we never, ever get to the depths or anywhere near the bottom of the fullness of Christ that has come through Paul. We shall go on, and, if we live twice or three times the length of our present life, we shall still be making discoveries of what we owe to Paul's faithfulness as a steward. That has been going on century after century. That is faithful stewardship, and although the steward may be called away from his earthly stewardship, the stewardship goes on. Faithfulness is always rewarded beyond our wildest dreams. May the Lord maintain us in faithfulness, even though that faithfulness may sometimes involve us in an appearance of utter failure. The Lord make us good stewards."

God's not looking for, or expecting, super saints or perfection – He is asking that we not give up; or give in.

Faithfulness matters – but it's not a salvation issue; it's a Judgment Seat issue. Here's how Samuel Hoyt puts it:

“To overdo the sorrow aspect of the Judgment Seat of Christ is to make heaven into hell. To underdo the sorrow aspect is to make faithfulness inconsequential.”

So, tonight, we're going to be looking at Pergamum and we'll see that the saints at Pergamum were told to avoid the Nicolaitans. They weren't just exhorted to avoid immorality; they were specifically asked to turn away from the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.

I need to build a principle and application around this.

Like James tells us in Jas. 1:22-25, one of the dangers we face is the deception that we can believe that since we've learned something, we're living it.

Believers can think that because they've been inspired by the knowledge of something, somehow, that automatically means they're living in the good of the knowledge they've learned.

We just have to keep in mind that overcomers aren't people who just hear messages or read books about overcomers.

Our faithfulness is demonstrated by our actions, not by our words.

It's possible to be a theological genius and a practical wash out. That's what James was warning us about.

To really be in the center of God's will for our lives, we have to lose the mindset of defining His will only in a general way. We don't just look at the Bible to see what the over-all will of the Lord is for believers throughout this age, we have to see, and be involved in, what God is doing now – in our generation and in our lives.

God has a purpose for the church age, but He also has a purpose for this generation; for this time - and for us individually.

This is the lesson of the prophets in the O.T. They didn't just call the people of God to remember the ten commandments, they also called them to conquer Canaan, or to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, etc.

They called them to the *present* reality of God's activity and desires.

And we see this throughout the church age also. Luther wasn't only called to witness to unbelievers and go to church, he was called to recover what was lost regarding justification by faith.

If he had settled for being a generalized believer (like 90% of the American church in our generation), the incredibly important truth of salvation by faith would have remained hidden.

Jesus kept the Law perfectly, but when confronted by the Jews He said, "I do only those things which I see My Father doing" (John 5:19).

He did what He saw His Father doing *then*, just as we are to do what we see Christ doing *now*. We're not called just to be Christians; we're called to be disciples. And a disciple doesn't follow His Master from a distance.

Maybe the saddest thing about our generation is that pastors have become generalized pastors. They are exclusively teaching overview Biblical principles and doing nothing to make their people aware of what God is doing, *specifically*, at this time in history.

Their people aren't being equipped to be a part of God's purpose and movement in this generation.

Eph. 4:16; “. . . the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

The overcomer discovers and embraces the ultimate purpose of God in Christ for the church, but also the individual purpose “every part” does as it's share.

Ok, let's read through the letter that was sent to Pergamum (Rev. 2:12-17)

“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.”

Throughout history, Satan's focus has been quite simply to destroy God's people: Whether he does it through violence (as in Smyrna) or through deception or corruption (as we'll see in Pergamum), the goal is the same.

Prevent the saints of God from reaching maturity and becoming those who will crush Satan under their feet.

When Constantine came to power in the third century, Satan moved from the persecution phase into the corruption phase of attack.

Once leaven is welcomed into the church, departure from the truth is inevitable. This is true on a church level and it is also true on an individual level. What we tolerate will destroy us.

Here's how Barnhouse puts it;

“Stagnation and degeneration are the laws of all life apart from God. Rust, decomposition, decay and corrosion are the common lot of every material thing in the universe. The sun, the rain, the air itself-all carry resistless arms of destruction. The very stars grow old.”

Constantine brought the "Ecclesia" of God into the political world - a Church/State union or "marriage" took place.

"Pergamum" literally means "marriage" or "union".

The church's calling, as distinct from this world, became blurred. She became earthly and more *like* than *unlike* the citizens of earth. She joined, or “married”, the world.

This is what Balaam represents; the corrupting of a Holy "set-apart" people by convincing them to adopt the ways of this world to fulfill the needs in their lives.

The method of Balaam is simply to eliminate the distinction and separation between God's people and the world.

Balaam and the Nicolaitans both represent a forsaking of the purity of undivided commitment to Jesus Christ.

This is what we've seen develop over the last few years in the United States. Christians are nearly as committed to America as they are to Christ.

We seem to have forgotten passages like these:

John 18:33-36; Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered him, "Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."

2 Tim. 2:4; "No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier."

We *are* in a war, a fierce battle; but it's against principalities and powers, not flesh and blood.

But also keep in mind that Jesus didn't tell the Roman Centurion that he had to leave his position.

If the Lord calls you to be a police officer to protect the innocent or a soldier to defend his country, you kill the enemy, period.

But these are individual callings based on what the Lord may be doing at this time in history; and what role he may want you to play.

In WW2 the victory of the Allies over the Axis forces was God's plan to stop Satan's attempted establishment of a global government through Hitler. This wasn't God's timing for the allowance of the kingdom of Antichrist.

At that time in history; the United States was destined to survive and Germany was destined to fail.

There is no general mandate to the body of Christ to become dominionists and conqueror the world through force.

The impact that the early church had on Rome was not by pulling swords and cutting of ears like Peter did; it was by spreading the power of God's Word – by *changing* hearts, not by stabbing them.

So, yes, we absolutely should vote; we should pray for those in government (1 Tim. 2:2), and we should do all we can to influence this culture by standing for what is right, but our primary objective in this world is to bring the lost to Christ and do our part to bring God's people to maturity.

Consider this: Paul was a Roman citizen. If he had lived in a nation that allowed its citizens to vote for their Caesars and one of the candidates was promoting death to all Christians, and the other was running on a freedom-of-religion platform, would Paul vote?

He would do whatever he was allowed to do legally to save lives, but his primary mission would be to plant churches throughout Asia Minor – because that was his part in the purpose of God.

Now, in vs. 13 our Lord presents Antipas as a model of one who would choose death before defilement. He was "faithful"! Here's some comments about this man;

"Church tradition tells us that this first martyr, called Antipas, was brought before a statue of Caesar and told to swear that Caesar was God. But Antipas boldly proclaimed that Jesus alone was the Lord, and that there was no other God but He. The Roman official exclaimed, 'Antipas, don't you know that the whole world is against you?' to which he replied, 'Then Antipas is against the whole world!' Antipas was put inside a brass bull which was heated with fire until he was roasted to death. Antipas was just an obscure man of history who was totally committed to Christ. (Lindsay)

As we saw at the beginning of our study, Antipas embodies the single most important principle found surfacing numerous times in these seven letters - "The faithfulness of the overcoming remnant".

What we saw in the early stages of formation in Ephesus, we see more fully developed in Pergamum - a growing departure from First Love.

When God's people start well, then at some point in their journey stop and settle for something less than God's original intent for them, corruption inevitably sets in.

One devastating reality in multigenerational apostasy is that when a person grows up in a spiritually apostate environment, he doesn't realize he's apostate, he doesn't even know what the original standard was.

This is what we are dealing with in our country in 2020. And this what Malachi had to deal with in Israel in the 5th century B.C.

Malachi 3:7-8; "Since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty.

"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'

"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me."

But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'

"In tithes and offerings.

And in vs. 13; "You have spoken arrogantly against me," says the Lord.

"Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'

They had been 'out of it' for so long; they didn't even know what "in God's plan" or "original intent" meant anymore. The Jews were totally confused at Malachi's indictments against them.

This was true In Malachi's day; in Pergamum's day, and in our day. 21st century Western Christianity is just as oblivious to what's right and what's true.

This is why the Nicolaitans gained access to this church; Pergamum could no longer discern what was dangerous.

The Nicolaitans taught a doctrine of compromise, implying that total separation between Christianity and the practice of occult paganism was not essential.

From Early Church records, it seems that Nicolas of Antioch (the founder of the Nicolaitans) was so immersed in occultism, Judaism, and Christianity that he bought into all of it.

He had no problem intermingling these belief systems and saw no reason why believers couldn't continue to fellowship with those still immersed in the black magic of the Roman empire and its mystery cults.

Probably the best way to illustrate how this applies to our century is to show the similarities between the underlying messages of the New Age movement and how they have been incorporated into 21st century Christian thought.

I'll give you four quick examples and as we look at them, try to see how these mindsets have affected churches or Christians you know.

1. The redefinition of sin

New Agers believe all people are inherently good – that sin should be looked at as failure not rebellion.

One New Age publication said that when Adam and Eve ate the fruit, it was their shame, not their sin, that separated them from God.

2. The denial of absolute truth

New Age thought is marked by relativism: a rejection of objective morality and absolute truth. If something feels true to you, it's true. If it feels right to you, it's right. If something feels real to you, it's reality. In other words, your own thoughts and feelings, or the prevailing narrative of the culture, are your authority for what is true and real.

These are some of the grids that believers are placing over Black Lives Matter, Social Justice, Bethel, Hillsong, and a multitude of deceptions that appeal to emotion and experience over Biblical truth.

3. It's all about "me"

New Age thought revolves around the "Self." Self-empowerment, self- image, self-realization. So, teachings in our churches become characterized by downplaying (or completely ignoring) moral sin and judgment, and hyper-emphasizing how blessed we are, and in a sense, what an awesome life we deserve.

Maybe this is why 44% of Christians in our nation think the Bible is ambiguous on abortion. So, murdering children might be acceptable? The Bible isn't clear about that?

4. Universalism

It's amazing that any Christian would run with this one, but I've started to see this surface too.

All roads lead to God. This is the spirit of the age and the ongoing message of Pope Francis.

The New Age movement is big on pluralism and universalism, which is the view that all religions are inspired by a common Source and they all point to the same truth that we will one day reach, regardless of what path we choose to get there.

It's the "love is more important than truth" concept moving into the church. It doesn't matter what we believe; we can be Satanists if we want – all that matters is that we love everybody. We have to be compassionate Satanists.

You probably remember this from a few years ago: The concept of universal reconciliation came into the Evangelical church through "The Shack".

Years later, the author, William Paul Young, said his intention in another book he wrote called "Lies We Believe About God" was to prove that everyone is saved, no exceptions.

These things are called "New Age", but none of this is really new.

Throughout church history these ideas have come up numerous times. They are old pagan teachings recycled as cool new ideas, and for the sake of the believer, they are overflowing with Christian terminology.

I like the way this author put it;

"Progressive Christians may think they are being cutting-edge and relevant by stepping outside the bounds of orthodoxy, but in reality, they are simply falling for the ideology that has kick-started every false religion since the fall of man: "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Romans 1:25).

Pergamum had their paganism and we have ours.

The solution to their problem was two-fold:

1st. (vs. 16) "Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth."

There has to be a full disclosure to the heart of the sin or error involved; which the Lord did. But conviction must lead to turning away from whatever has our ears closed, so we are ready to follow Christ.

It's like we saw in James – we have to know the truth, but we also have to do something in response to the revelation we receive.

2nd. (vs. 17) “To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.”

If we turn away from what has frozen our spiritual advance, the Lord will guide us back to the living reality of "First Love".

In any departure, for any of us, God will always call for repentance and then bring us to intimacy. Both "hidden manna" (nourishment) and a personal "secret name" speak of restored love and a deepened relationship.

This is the challenge and call to Pergamum. As Walter Scott puts it,

"A 'white stone' was largely employed in the social life and judicial customs of the ancients. Days of festivity were noted by a white stone; days of calamity by a black stone. A host's appreciation of a special guest was indicated by a white stone with a name or message written on it. A white stone meant acquittal; a black stone meant condemnation in the courts of justice. Here the overcomer is promised a white stone and a new name written thereon, which none knows save the happy recipient. It is the expression of the Lord's personal delight in each one of the conquering band. It is by no means a public reward. There are common and special blessings now; there will be public and individual joys then. The Lord's approbation of, and special delight in, each one of the triumphant company will be answer enough to the scorn heaped upon the faithful witness now. The new name on the stone, alone known to the overcomer, signifies Christ, then known in a special way to each one, and that surely is reward beyond all price and beyond all telling. . . It is a secret communication of love and intelligence between Christ and the overcomer, a joy which none can share, a reserved token of appreciative love."

The enemy doesn't care how many or how big our churches are; he doesn't care how technically accurate our teaching is; or how exhilarating our worship is; or how consistent our service and outreach is - he loves all of man's perfected forms of Christianity.

But any form of man-made Christianity, no matter how 'good' it may appear to us, is an enemy of spiritual life.

As one British author puts it,

"In multitudes of places, so far as the preaching is concerned, so far as the activities are concerned, no fault can be found, but there is no sense of vitalizing. There is no energizing, no impact, no moving of the people to register the testimony of the risen Lord against the forces of evil. The enemy is getting them all quietly, nicely, snugly, into spiritual death."

These churches, including Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea, may have perfected some form of Christianity, but any form of Christianity, apart from God's Spirit, however appealing, obstructs the flow of Divine Life.

The ultimate issue we all face is the issue of spiritual life. We can perfect every element, every nuance of our Christian religious experience and service and still be completely dead to the Life of God.

Spiritual life is the presence and expression of Christ Himself in His people. And this isn't accomplished through religion or imitation; it's brought about by relationship, by personal intimacy.

A couple of closing examples to reinforce the faithfulness characteristic of Pergamum.

Jonathan Edwards once said,

"Resolved: that all men should live for the glory of God. Resolved second: whether others do or not, I will."

And John Newton said on his death bed;

“My memory is fading, but I remember two things: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.”