

Finishing Well

Lesson #35

Spiritual Warfare in Compromising Church

Sept. 6, 2023

Doctrine of the Nicolaitans

Rev. 2:6 Jesus told the church of Ephesus, But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

Hate = *miseo*: to hate, to abhor, or to find utterly repulsive.

It describes a person who has a *deep-seated animosity*, who is *antagonistic* to something he finds to be *completely objectionable*. He not only loathes that object but *rejects it entirely*.

Jesus hated their "deeds" which is the Greek word *erga*, meaning *works*.

No doubt the leaders of the Ephesian church protected their flock from these destructive heresies and kept their people from committing the same evil deeds.

Note: What the Ephesians opposed, Pergamos embraced as a doctrine.

Rev. 2:12-17 And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write, 'These things says He who has the sharp two-edged sword: ¹³ "I know your works, and where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. And you hold fast to My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days in which Antipas was My faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴ But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. ¹⁵ Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate.¹⁶ Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

It is significant that the "deeds" and "doctrines" of the Nicolaitans are *only* mentioned in connection with the churches in these two occultic and pagan cities.

In the city of Pergamos, there were numerous dark and sinister forms of occultism, causing Pergamos to be one of the most wicked cities in the history of the ancient world.

For Christians in Pergamos, the constant temptation:

- Compromise their Christian beliefs for social and political acceptance.

Christians refusing to adapt to pagan society were exposed to harsh ridicule and rejection.

This rejection from society set the table for the teachings of the Nicolaitans, a teaching which was the sort of leaven which could destroy the Christian community.

Combining pagan practices and teachings with God's Word, replacing the teachings of God's Word with corrupt, pagan deceptions and lies, is straight from the bowels of Satan the devil!

The core of Christian people in Pergamos who were holding fast to the name of the Lord, to His person, not wavering on who He was, not denying the faith, firm in the gospel and believing it, were soft in dealing with error...serious error.

It seems Balaam's actions are given first as an example of the doctrine and actions of the Nicolaitans to make sure we understand the doctrine they taught.

Rev. 2:15 Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. When Balaam could not successfully curse the people of God, he seduced them into unbridled, sensual living by dangling the prostitutes of Moab before the men of Israel.

The second generation of Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for nearly 40 years. They had eaten manna and water, with almost no exceptions. They had seen MANY die due to rebellion and unbelief. God had just given 2 major victories over Sihon & Og.

They are about to embark on the conquest of the Promised Land, their inheritance.

Numbers 25:1a Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove,

Remained = #03427 = yashab = to dwell, remain, sit down, abide, to stay, one's abode.

Yashab is translated married 6 times in the OT which gives us a sense of the meaning of yashab and the danger in which Israel had placed itself!

This verb is not the same verb as to "camp" which is what they should have been doing!

- Camped = #02583 = chanah is used repeatedly of Israel setting up camp in their wilderness journey.

The Holy Spirit does not use that word in this passage which is their last stop before crossing into the Promised Land! Instead, He chose yashab and not the verb chanah which means to pitch a tent, which is quite different than abiding or tarrying as implicit in yashab! Israel should have camped instead of remaining or tarrying but they remained at Acacia Grove for a long time before crossing the Jordan and entering their Promised Land.

Num. 25:1-3 Now Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor.

Suddenly the "welcome wagon" arrives at the Israelites' camp. Friendly neighbors come by to welcome them to the neighborhood and extend an invitation to come to their worship feast.

Did the Israelites realize: *to share such a meal with the Moabites was to join them in the worship of their gods?*

The Canaanites incorporated sexual immorality into their religion, as an "act of worship."

By participating in the pagan sacrificial meals, and by engaging in sexual relations with the Moabites as an act of worship, the Israelites both committed sexual immorality and engaged in spiritual harlotry.

The judgment of God fell upon His people. He sent a plague which killed 24,000 Israelites.

II Pet. 2:1 But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

Nicolaitans identifies the group who were teaching Balaamism. Note the words "thus ... in the same way." It seems clear they were subjugating the people to Satan's authority

by teaching compromise with the world which always neutralizes the church and results in a weakened and powerless form of Christianity. The church loses its pilgrim perspective [settle down; remain] and adopts the viewpoint, values, priorities, and pursuits of the world.

There are two prevalent theories about the Nicolaitans and their deeds.

1. The Nicolaitans are the followers of a false teacher in the early church named Nicolas who taught believers it was permissible to live a life of sexual immorality and fleshly indulgence.
 - a. The Nicolaitans taught: in order to enjoy the acceptance of Roman society, the followers of Christ must compromise and adapt to their pagan communities.
 - b. The Nicolaitans campaigned accommodation to pagan society by eating food sacrificed to idols and by engaging in sexual immorality.

Irenaeus and Hippolytus, two leaders in the Early Church who recorded many of the events that occurred in the earliest recorded days of Church history, said:

1. The Nicolaitans were the spiritual descendants of Nicolas of Antioch, who had been ordained as a deacon.

Acts 6:5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch.

2. Chief criteria for selection: They were men "...of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom..."(v. 3). Once they had been chosen, they were presented by the people to the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on them.

Acts 6:5 tells us Nicolas was "a proselyte of Antioch."

- Born of non-Israelite [Greek or Roman] lineage
- Joins the Jews' religion by circumcision and obedience to the requirements of Moses.
- First non-Jewish converts to the church.

The fact he was a proselyte tells us:

1. He was not born a Jew but had converted from paganism to Judaism.
2. Then he experienced a second conversion > turning from Judaism to Christianity.

From this information, we assume these traits about Nicolas of Antioch:

He came from paganism and had deep pagan roots, very much unlike the other six deacons who came from a pure Hebrew line. Nicolas' pagan background meant he had previously been immersed in the activities of the occult.

Barclay: He was a free thinker and very open to embracing new ideas and concepts.

Judaism was very different from the pagan and occult world in which he had been raised. For him to shift from paganism to Judaism reveals he was liberal in his thinking, for most pagans were offended by Judaism.

He was not afraid of taking an opposing position, evidenced by his ability to change religions twice. Converting to Judaism would have estranged him from his pagan family and friends.

When he converted to Christ, it was at least the second time he had converted from one religion to another. His ability to easily change religious "hats" implies he was not afraid to switch direction in midstream and go a totally different direction.

Nicolas' deep roots in paganism may have produced in him a tolerance for occultism and paganism. Growing up in this perverted spiritual environment may have caused him to view these belief systems as not so damaging or dangerous. This wrong perception would have resulted in a very liberal viewpoint that encouraged people to stay connected to the world and conduct yourself any way you want.

According to the writings of the Early Church leaders,

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

➤ You needn't be so strict about separation from the world to be a Christian.

2. It seems apparent Nicolas of Antioch was immersed in occultism, Judaism, and Christianity. He had a stomach for all of it.

3. He had no problem intermingling these belief systems in various concoctions 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 countless mystery cults.

4. "Tertullian reports the lust and luxury of the Nicolaitans; "impudent in uncleanness." He adds there was another sort of Nicolaitans, a satanic sect, called the Gaian heresy.

➤ Worship of Mother Earth had reared its ugly head.

Rom 1:25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever.

5. Clement of Alexandria referred to followers of Nicolaus as, 'lascivious goats.'

6. Irenaeus defined them as men who "lead lives of unrestrained indulgence.

7. Ignatius: "They affirm unlawful unions are a good thing and place the highest happiness in pleasure."

8. Hippolytus, adds that Nicolas "departed from sound doctrine, and taught the Gnostic belief of the irrelevance of physical things. (*Refutation of All Heresies*, 7.24)

9. Both Irenaeus [*Against Heresies* 1.26.3; 3.10.6] and Clement of Alexandria [*Miscellanies*, 3.4.25f] consider Nicolas of Antioch to be the founder of the Gnostic sect known as the Nicolaitans. The last mention of Nicolas in the post-biblical, historical record is in the context of syncretism.

Numerous Bible scholars hold the following belief about the Nicolaitans:

1. They were comparable to those following Balaamism which advocated a mingled lifestyle.

2. This doctrine advocated an extreme indulgence in sin, uncleanness, immorality and orgies based upon a perverted understanding of God's grace. It was an abuse of freedom.

3. Freedom of the Flesh - The Deeds of the flesh have no effect upon the health of the soul. Therefore, the deeds of the flesh have no relation to salvation.

4. Their doctrine - *Grace Gives Us A License To Sin* - led to a weak version of Christianity without power and without conviction - a defeated, worldly type of Christianity.
5. He was teaching the people to stumble and sin against God with his extreme teaching and twisting of the message of grace.
6. This kind of teaching would result in nothing but total defeat for its followers. When believers allow sin and compromise in their lives, it drains away the power of the Spirit resident in a believer's life.

Warning Against Turning God's Grace To Legalism

Paul dealt with "false brethren unawares brought in" who promoted a different but equally dangerous error which turned the grace of God into bondage to legalism.

Gal. 1:6-7 I marvel that ye are so soon removed [turning away] from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: ⁷ Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you and would pervert the gospel of Christ.

- ❖ *Metastrepho* = Transform into something of an opposite character = *Grace to Works*
- ❖ Some were trying to add **LAW** requirements to the good news of God's grace.
- ❖ This attempt to turn grace into a performance standard is described as a perversion, a grievous twisting, of grace.

Gal. 5:13 For, brethren, you have been called to freedom [liberty]; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

- God's true children ought to live according to the NEW NATURE which He has given each one. [Gal. 6:15; I John 3:7-12]

TRUTH: Whether license or legalism, **BOTH** change and undermine the grace of God.

If he can pervert your concept of grace - if he can get you to see grace as an Excuse For Permissiveness - then he can start you down a path to bondage.

- Soon you'll be doing things you never could have conceived.
- Satan will have sold you the lie that it's okay for you to indulge your lust.

Charles Stanley: Grace is NOT God's sanction by which we plan and excuse our personal indulgence.

Paul writes to some who took God's grace in the same unwarranted direction.

- ❖ They started with a glorious truth in:
Rom. 5:20 Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.
- ❖ No matter how atrocious the extent of our sins, the grace of God unto forgiveness and transformation is even far greater. **WOW!**

Stanley: They promote the idea that our continuing in sin would only present further opportunities for more abounding grace.

- ❖ How heinous is the licentious thought that more indulgence in sin would be a good thing.

Truth: Grace is God's means of forgiving our sins, justification, as well as transforming the sinner into the image of Jesus Christ, sanctification.

TRUTH: Anticipated grace is never an excuse for planning to sin.

The evil fruit of Nicolas' "doctrine" encouraged worldly participation, leading people to indulge in sin and a lowered godly standard. In this way he literally conquered the people.

Two prevalent theories about the Nicolaitans and their deeds.

2. "Nicolaitans" is derived from the Greek word *nikolaos*, a compound of *nikos* and *laos*.

- *nikos* = to conquer or to subdue.
- *laos* = the people. It is where we get the word *laity*.

When these two words are compounded into one, they form the name *Nicolas*, which literally means one who conquers and subdues the people.

Thus, many commentators believe the Nicolaitans established a religious system in which a "religious elite" would rule over or lord over those of lesser rank > clergy & laity.

- This is a false division not taught in the New Testament.
- The leadership elevated themselves above the body.

Truth: All of the body is under the authority and leadership of Jesus Christ.

1. They taught the body was independent of the soul.

This way, according to them, it was possible to commit sin in one's body without causing harm to one's soul.

This practice allowed a departure from teaching the Word of God to a methodology for enslaving the laity and corrupting them by religious rituals, traditions of men, and idolatry. The Nicolaitans were conquering the people by bringing them under Satan's authority through influential teachers who were tolerating or even promoting evil or license to sin.

- Their doctrine was a threat to the church.

In our study of the seven churches, we have gone from "murder" to "mixture."

- Martyrdom tends to purify the church.
- Mixture, a breakdown in Biblical separation into worldliness, putrefies the church.

Prophetically speaking this happened during these centuries, and eventually evolved to the point where these men who were separating themselves as bishops and priests were pronouncing absolution over the people of God, forgiveness of sins, taking confessions, sending people to heaven, damning people to hell! They gained a triumphal victory or conquest over the laity. Members were compelled and forced to submit to the arbitrary dominion of men who have become that thing which God hates: Christ says: 'I hate it!'

I Pet. 5:1-3 "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; NOR AS BEING LORDS OVER THOSE ENTRUSTED TO YOU,

- but being examples to the flock."

The doctrine of the Nicolaitans appears to have been a form of antinomianism.

- two Greek words, *anti*, meaning "against"; and *nomos*, meaning "law."

Theologically, Antinomianism is the belief that there are no moral laws God expects Christians to obey. Antinomianism takes a biblical teaching to an unbiblical conclusion.

The biblical teaching is that Christians are not required to observe the Old Testament Law as a means of salvation. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He fulfilled the Old Testament Law [Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:23-25; Ephesians 2:15].

The unbiblical conclusion: There is no moral law God expects Christians to obey.

J. C. Ryle: They are people who boast of having a saving interest in Christ, and say they are pardoned and forgiven, while at the same time they live in willful sin and open breach of God's commandments. I dare say that such people are miserably deceived.

It is a belief based upon a recognition of the mercy of God as the ground of salvation, but it makes the fatal mistake that man can freely partake in sin because the Law of God is no longer binding. It misapplies the meaning of God's gracious favor. It supposed that a mere intellectual "belief" in this truth had a saving power.

Antinomianism simply means you don't have to obey any laws of God, because you are under grace.

Stephen Black: [*First Stone Ministries*] What is very alarming to us at First Stone is that this perverse-grace teaching is permeating the Church at large by giving a segue to "gay Christianity." My grief in this teaching is that many are embracing "gay Christianity" as a new revelation of grace and have gone back to damnable sinful behavior leading to destruction.

I Cor.10:12 Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

If an apostolic Deacon could turn apostate and become a mighty weapon in the hands of Satan for the destruction of the church, then we must be careful.

Warren Wiersbe: Any theology that makes sin easy and divine punishment unimportant is NOT Biblical theology. God's judgment begins with His own people. (II Pet. 4:17)

Jesus' words to the seven churches in Revelation strongly contradict the idea that Christians never need to repent. To the church at Ephesus, Jesus said, "Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" [Rev. 2:4]. Jesus rebukes 5 of the 7 churches and demands repentance from them [Rev. 2:4, 6, 20; 3:3, 15-19].

Far from believers being unaccountable for their sin, they must answer to Jesus for their disobedience. [II Cor. 5:10].

The root of compromise is in our lack of belief in who Christ proclaimed Himself to be.

We compromise when we have no idea the eternal treasure we forfeit in an effort to be liked and approved.

The spirit of Nicolas/Nimrod and religious deception is alive and well and thriving in this end-time generation. The antinomian spirit, the attitude of lawlessness, allows sin to infest the church. Jesus, Paul, Peter, Jude and John warn against the encroachment of antinomianism or

lawlessness. The only way to recognize false teaching is to be intimately familiar with truth through the diligent study of the Word of God.

Millions of people go through the motions of worship each week but maintain a heart completely out of touch with God. We can meticulously avoid all overt acts of worldliness as we might define them, and still have a heart full of hypocrisy, criticism of others, jealousy, bitterness, envy, and preoccupation with the details of life rather than eternal treasures.

Admonition: Rev. 2:16 "Repent or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth."

I Cor. 5:6 "A little leaven leavens the whole lump. Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened'.

It festers and grows. There's no room for compromise.

You can never suppress error by compromising with it.

The sword of judgment is poised over their heads, and His patience is not limitless.

The Lord says to Pergamos: "Sort it out, or I'll come and sort it out myself".

The moon was eclipsed one night, and said to the sun,

'Why do you not shine on me the way you used to?'

The sun said, 'I'm shining on you the way I always do, but the world has come between us.

True Biblical Grace Is Holy-Ghost Empowerment To Live a Godly Life and Deny Ungodliness.

Heb. 12:28 The writer of Hebrews urges us, Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, Let Us Have Grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear:

This verse Ties Grace To Reverence. a concept of God that includes awe, respect and soberness.

I Pet. 1:13 "Gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

Peter ties grace to a sober reverence that produces true gladness in the heart.

Two Traits That Biblical Grace Produces In The Life Of A Believer:

1. An anticipation and longing for the coming of the Lord
2. A Godly fear and holy reverence for the Lord. These two fruits of grace's work are inseparable. We simply can't possess one without the other.

Titus 2:11-13 "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ."

But even with his strong warning that we not pervert the grace of God, Jude ends with a dazzling word in verses 24-25 about how our only hope for the road ahead is God's true grace:

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, To the only wise God, our Savior, be glory, majesty, dominion, and power, both now and forever. Amen.

Do not remain in Acacia Grove. Surrender on the Potter's Wheel. Live the Abundant Life.