

# THE LAST VIRTUE

## Future Faith (Part 3)

Text: Revelation 2:12-17

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*This message was provided by Christ Church of Oak Brook and Love Changes Life, the broadcast ministry at Christ Church of Oak Brook.*

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### I

I read recently of a hurried pastor who parked his car in a no-parking zone but posted the following note beneath the windshield wiper: "I have circled this block 10 times and found no parking space. I have an appointment to keep. *Forgive us our trespasses.*" Two hours later he returned to his car, and found a parking ticket and another note, attached to his original one. The note read: "I have circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket, I lose my job. *Lead us not into temptation.*"

It's hard sometimes, isn't it, to see or find the appropriate relationship between grace and accountability, mercy and judgment – or as the Bible often puts it – between love and truth? Someone has said that love and truth are a bit like sodium and chloride. "Sodium is an extremely active element found naturally only in combined form; it always links itself to another element. Chlorine, on the other hand, is the poisonous gas that gives bleach its offensive odor. But when sodium and chlorine are combined, the result is" wonderful. It becomes "sodium chloride – table salt – the substance we use to preserve meat and bring out its flavor."<sup>1</sup>

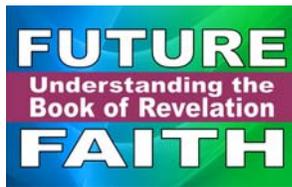
If you think about it, love and truth work a bit like that too. Truth without love can be a dangerous and noxious substance. It can burn and offend, without doing much good. No matter how true the truth is, without love tempering its chemistry, truth tends to discourage instead of challenge, and to break the spirit instead of activate the will. Unless someone knows that we "**speak the truth in love,**"<sup>2</sup> rather than fear or anger or pride, the message will likely be received as destructive criticism instead of the creative critique that seasons a soul.

That is why, I suppose, when he speaks to the Churches at the end of the age, Jesus identifies **first love** as the foremost Christian virtue. A church or an individual Christian that is filled first and foremost with the love of Christ will be able to resolve conflicts and reconcile relationships and renew vision in a gracious manner that convinces people and reminds us all that Jesus truly is "**the Way, the Truth, and the Life.**"<sup>3</sup>

That was something that the Christians at Ephesus apparently needed to remember, do some repenting over, and resume wholeheartedly. As parents, friends, mentors, and church-members, sometimes we do too. A lack of love, however, isn't always the most pressing problem a Christian or church faces. Sometimes the greatest need is at the other end of the spectrum. The Christians at Pergamum, for example, had the love ingredient in significant measure. But if they were going to be **the "salt of the earth"**<sup>4</sup> Christ wanted them to be, then their love -- perhaps like yours and mine -- had to be blended with more of the Truth.

### II

The city of Pergamum was located on the same postal circuit road that connected all the other churches mentioned in the book of Revelation. Like the city of Athens, it had a spectacular acropolis that sat atop a massive rocky mount, rising 1000 feet above the Caicus River plain,



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and visible for miles around. The city had first gained notoriety back in 133 B.C. when it was made the official capitol of the Roman Province of Asia. In the years that followed, Pergamum became the official center of the Imperial Cult that worshipped Caesar as divine.

In addition to a succession of magnificent temples erected to honor Rome's emperors, Pergamum boasted an immense altar to the god "Zeus the Savior" that had been hewn out of the very rock of the mountain. There were elegant temples to Athena, the goddess of war; to Dionysus, the god of wine; and to Asklepios, the god of healing. In this way, Pergamum became a place of devotion for all who put their faith in power, pleasure, and medical science as the keys to human hope. Jesus called this center of misplaced worship the "**throne of Satan**" in his letter to the church.

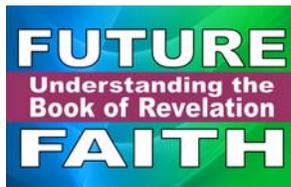
We don't seem to take so seriously the almost cultic devotion many in our day still give to the gods of power, pleasure, and biotechnology, but the Christians of Pergamum apparently did, and Jesus was moved by their devotion. "**You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city,**" said the Lord of the Church. Somehow, the believers in Pergamum remained bold in their declaration of their love for Christ, even when one of their number was actually executed for refusing to confess that Caesar was Lord.

### III

And yet as steadfast as those Christians had been in not publicly caving to the society around them, there was something going on within their circle that was of great concern to God. Jesus puts it this way: "**Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam... Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**"

To understand what's going on here requires paging back in Scripture to an episode in the history of Israel recorded in the Book of Numbers. There we read about Balaam, a prophet in the employ of King Balak of Moab, a nation that repeatedly tried to stop Israel's colonization of the Promised Land. Unable to defeat Israel in an external battle, Balaam devised a scheme for weakening Israel from the inside. He organized the young women of Moab to go out and seduce the soldiers of Israel. Over time, many of the Israelite men surrendered the purity of their faith by joining these enchanting women in the Moabite's idolatrous and immoral feasts. A subtle doctrinal and moral slide began, the ultimate devastation of which wouldn't be seen till many years later.

As near as scholars can determine, what Balaam was to ancient Israel, these Nicolaitans were to the life of the early church. Through subtle distortions of Christian truth, they poisoned the purity of the faith from the inside. They taught that since Christ has set us free from the penalty of sin we should no longer get so uptight about our moral behaviors. "Hasn't Christ



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redeemed us from the law," they asked? Therefore we are no longer under law but grace. In fact, it's O.K. to sin a little bit because that way God's grace will continue to abound toward us in forgiveness.

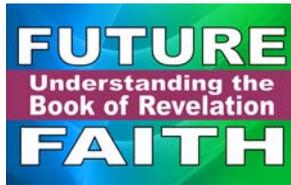
That kind of thinking remains active in the church today. "Let's not go to extremes with all this rigid morality stuff" some people will say. "Hey, we're all human. God knows that. He's not going to demand too much from us. He's certainly not unreasonable and he's infinitely patient. So what if we back-bite and gossip a bit? What's the big deal if we tell a few off-color jokes around the office or golf course? Come on, how much real harm is there in a little good-natured gambling, the occasional expletive not deleted, some old-fashioned rage now and then? Hey, isn't Christ the Lord of loving grace, so let's cut ourselves and each other some more slack."

### IV

Have you ever heard that sort of "teaching?" Have you ever heard it come out of your own mouth or spoken in your soul? I know I have. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that "Truth is beautiful, without a doubt; but so are lies." Sometimes the lies find a place in me because I believe so heartily in the God of Love. But in Jude 1:4 we are warned to beware of **"godless [people], who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord."** We must be doubly careful that we are not such godless people ourselves. *For, if love is the first virtue of a healthy person or people, then the uncritical tolerance of sin is the last virtue of a corrupt soul or society.*

The church is and must continue to be a place where we grow toward greater health. We are called to be a community where the loving grace of God is found; but that grace must always be tempered by a knowledge of and obedience to the truth. The truth is that Jesus Christ calls us to pray fervently for a change in our sinful attitudes, to repent actively of our misdeeds, and to pursue zealously the purity of character and conduct that we see in him. He asks us to align our lives to the plumb-line of his Word. How closely is your life aligned to that standard of truth? How genuine is your desire to even have your life line up to the Truth in that way? Sometimes the first step in making some progress in that direction lies in simply admitting to God, ourselves, and one another that we know we have a long way to go. Sometimes people have the courage to do that...

At a college in Fort Wayne, Indiana, the speaker for morning chapel suddenly cancelled his appearance at the last moment. Desperate for something to fill the service, President Wesley Berig called upon anyone willing to share their testimony. After a long, awkward pause, one student stood up and confessed that he'd lost a sense of direction for his life, and needed to find a purpose for living higher than simply getting into grad school. Inspired by this first speaker, a young woman rose and told of her secret eating disorder and aching desire to gain control of the problem. Another and another stood and told of their sense of failure, confusion,



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and hunger till -- before anyone realized it -- five hours had passed. When interviewed later on the reason for this incredible outburst of confession, one student allegedly said: "I simply got tired of the sham. I've been here three years, and I figured it's about time I got straightened out."

Perhaps each of us can begin anew again today. **"For if the salt loses its saltiness,"** says Jesus, **"what good is it?"** And **"you are the salt of the earth."**<sup>5</sup>

Please pray with me...

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<sup>1</sup>Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching, Leadership Journal, p.269.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:15

<sup>3</sup> John 14:6

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:13

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:13



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