

# Revelation 2:14-15

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*Jesus warns the believers in Pergamum against the false teachers in their midst who are like Balaam, a prophet from the book of Numbers, who led the Israelites into sin for personal material gain to himself.*

After the commendation comes the exhortation, where the church in Pergamum is corrected on the things that they can improve on: the *few things against you*. These were that they had false teachers in their midst: *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*.

It seems to be inferred that the believers in the church at Pergamum were not expelling these false teachers, as the Bible exhorts be done (2 John 1:10). So they were faithfully standing against the Roman authorities, and not denying their witness in the face of persecution and even death (Revelation 2:12-13) but were not displaying that same courage within their own number. Sometimes it is easier to face an overt enemy than a friend or ally in error.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us to correct our fellow brothers only after we have examined and dealt with our own sin. Further, Jesus says that correction is holy, and we should not waste it on those not ready and willing to hear ([See commentary on Matthew 7:1-5](#)). The exception is false teachers. False teachers are to be confronted directly, and openly if necessary, even as Jesus publicly confronted the false teaching of the Pharisees, who were religious leaders in Israel (Matthew 23). This is to prevent evil and deception from spreading and devouring people (1 Peter 5:8). Satan can work deception through anyone, as evidenced by the Apostle Peter (Matthew 16:23).

All seven churches who received these letters existed at once, so any church can have the characteristics and issues displayed by these churches at any time. But these letters can also be viewed as representing eras of the western church. This letter can be viewed as representing the period from 330 AD—when Constantine named Constantinople the new capital of the Roman Empire and started the eastern church—to 800 AD when Charlemagne ascended the throne to the Holy Roman empire. This can be called the syncretistic church because of the combining of different religions that happened during this era. This would fit the image of *Balaam*, who desired to gain benefit from the things of God while simultaneously profiting from the things of the world.

In 313 AD, the Edict of Milan inaugurated religious toleration for Christianity within the Roman Empire. Christianity became the official religion of the empire by 325 AD when the Council of Nicaea was held, and produced a statement of beliefs known as the Nicene Creed that summarized the fundamental beliefs of Christianity.

When Christianity became the official religion of Rome, there were many new converts to Christianity, most from a Gentile or pagan background. These converts brought their own culture and traditions with them. By this time, Jewish influence on Christianity had waned, and with it likely a substantial loss of knowledge of scripture. So it seems reasonable in such a circumstance to produce a creed in order to highlight the most important doctrines of Christianity.

Possibly up to 90% of the Roman empire was pagan prior to Christianity being declared the empire's official religion. Therefore when Christianity became the official religion of Rome, most of these pagans converted. So the church would have had a massive task to find a means to assimilate them.

One observable assimilation strategy was for the church to provide Christian substitutes for pagan traditions. For example, Christmas (the birth of Jesus) was celebrated in place of the pagan festival of the Winter Solstice. The Christmas tree came from a repurposing of the Winter Solstice celebration. Perhaps in order to provide a replacement for the pagan priests, the church began to appoint Christian priests within the church. These actions would seem to be an excellent plan to assimilate the massive influx of pagans into the church. However, only so much could be done, and syncretism still occurred. Thus leaders became self-serving, as did *Balaam*.

It seems likely that those initially appointed to power in the early church would have been men of great character, who (like Antipas) had faced persecution and martyrdom. In time, it appears many leaders shifted from serving as elders/shepherds to being false rulers, in the spirit of *Balaam*.

Unlike the pagan religions, the church of the New Testament has no human intermediary standing between any believer and God, since Jesus is God. Rather it has elders/overseers whose job is to shepherd the church (2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1; 1 Peter 5:1; Titus 1:5). The Bible does not require a specific title for those who shepherd the church. Scripture does however exhort those who serve the office of elder/overseer to serve rather than lord over their flock (1 Peter 5:1-5). It makes clear that church leaders will face accountability for their service before Jesus, the "Chief Shepherd."

In a fallen world, those with positional power are tempted to abuse that power. Paul was aware of this in his own flesh, saying one reason he paid his own way rather than raising financial support was because he did not want to overuse his authority (1 Corinthians 9:18). In time, for many, positions of church leadership became mere political posts. As with any organization, leaders can take positions of authority, then abuse their power and exploit and control for their own selfish gain.

Just as *Balaam* wanted to be able to work with, and gain benefits from both God and the world, so these false teachers in Pergamum wanted to use their positions to exploit those who followed them. Thus Jesus says that they *have there some in the church of Pergamum who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel*.

The false teacher named *Balaam* was a prophet in the Old Testament. Some question whether he is a true or a false prophet. It is possible that he is a picture of someone who attempts to be both. Balaam tried to keep his prophetic office with the true and living God, while also gaining money the world promised him. He wanted the benefits of both. But it is impossible to serve both the kingdom of darkness and also hold true to the Kingdom of Light (John 3:19; 2 Corinthians 6:14).

The story of *Balaam* is told in the book of Numbers throughout chapters 22 to 31. At this time, the Israelites were camping at Moab near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness between escaping from Egypt and reaching the Promised Land.

*Balaam* was offered a reward from *Balak*, the king of Moab, to curse the Israelites. Moab was a country bordering Canaan's eastern border. It was from the plains of Moab that Israel camped to hear the last words of Moses (the book of Deuteronomy) then cross over the Jordan river. *Balaam* wanted the reward from *Balak* king of Moab, so he persisted in discovering a way to curse them, without crossing God, so he could gain the promised reward from Balak, the enemy of God's people. But God kept telling Balaam to bless the Israelites instead. So Balaam turned to another strategy.

*Balaam* apparently found what he considered to be a loophole for himself. He went to *Balak* king of Moab and told him to get the Moabite women to go seduce the Israelite men and lead them into sexual *immorality* and Baal worship so that God would judge them. Balaam *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*. The eating of *things sacrificed to idols* is likely connected with the *acts of immorality*, since pagan religions (like Baal worship) generally featured sexual immorality as an integral part of their worship.

This indicates that Balaam knew the provisions of God's [suzerain-vassal](#) style covenant/treaty with Israel, which contained blessings for obedience and curses/judgment for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28:15; 28:1-2). Balaam's advice to *Barak* was to entrap the Israelites through sexual temptation, so that God would discipline them, per the terms of the covenant/treaty. However, God is not fooled by loopholes, and Israel slayed Balaam (Joshua 13:22).

2 Peter summarizes *Balaam*'s problem, saying:

“Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray, having followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; but he received a rebuke for his own transgression, for a mute donkey, speaking with a voice of a man, restrained the madness of the prophet.”

(2 Peter 2:15-16)

Balaam loved the reward of the world, and sought to gain it, while still maintaining his position of authority as a prophet of God. In Revelation 2:14, it says that the two things that *Balaam* led the *sons of Israel* to do that were contrary to God's commandments were to *eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality*, which we can read as sexual *immorality* given the context.

The phrase *eating things sacrificed to idols* would indicate participation in pagan worship. The false perspective at the root of worshipping *idols* is the belief that the ultimate power in the universe is “me.” Idolatry is a transactional relationship where we pay money (or something else), in exchange for some desired blessing. The idea is that we can manipulate the spiritual powers to do our bidding. It is not rational to believe a wooden statue has power to save us (Isaiah 44:13-18). However, it does allow a rationale and moral authority for us to justify exploiting others.

Through this false perspective, we gain the illusion that we are the one in control—we are the one making things happen. In the context of the Moabites, if you wanted a child, you could go to the fertility idol and pay some price in order to gain what is desired. In our modern context we do different types of transactions, which amount to the same thing; we might enter into transactional relationships with modern idols who falsely promise happiness in exchange for service to the idol.

An example might be the pursuit of material wealth accumulation. The promise is that “more” will make us happy. However, “more” is (by definition) not obtainable. It is always “the next thing.” We can never possess what we do not have. Therefore, this philosophy can never deliver true happiness. If we live with the illusion that we can gain happiness through controlling our circumstances (of material wealth), we just end up serving money, rather than having it serve us (Matthew 6:24). Idolatry always leads to a form of self-induced slavery.

If then we take *eating things sacrificed to idols* as representing an attempt to control our happiness (rather than following God’s ways), sexual *immorality* feeds the lie that “I can create my own fulfillment through exploiting others.” There are no winners when two humans attempt to exploit one another; everyone loses.

When we think we are in control, too often the true reality is that we have simply become a slave to the things we are pursuing. In the case of the *sons of Israel* in the story of *Balaam*, who had just escaped slavery in Egypt, they were constantly tempted to go back to Egypt. This is a picture of a New Testament believer who slips back into slavery and sin, even though he or she has been truly delivered from the power of sin. Like Balaam, we are seeking the empty pleasures from the world rather than pursuing the true and lasting benefits we can gain from the ways of the LORD. But like Balaam, we can’t have it both ways; light and darkness do not mix.

The second set of false teachers Jesus chastises is the *Nicolaitans*. What or who they were appears to be lost to history, but the word *Nicolaitans* means “people destroyer,” which is likely a pejorative term applied to them. They might also have been those who abused authority in order to exploit those whom they should have been serving. If so, they would be a logical extension of the attitude held by Balaam, seeking to abuse his authority for worldly gain.

It is notable that Jesus says that He has a few things *against* the church of Pergamum, which would indicate that He is chastising the church, rather than only chastising the *Nicolaitans*. This would mean that the gathering of believers there in Pergamum was listening to and accommodating these bad leaders and false teachers. Therefore, the church as a whole was held accountable by Jesus.

The Bible asserts that church leaders and teachers will be held to a high standard, and are expected to serve the flock they shepherd (James 3:1; 1 Peter 5:1-4). But those who fail to faithfully discharge their responsibility are to be avoided (Timothy 6:3-5). The “fruit inspection” biblical concept applies in context to believers judging Christian teachers. We are not supposed to listen to or follow those who do not live consistently with the teachings of the Bible (Matthew 7:15-16).

Jesus is holding the church at Pergamum accountable for not disciplining their teachers when they go astray. This is consistent with the governing structure God gave Israel in the Old Testament. God gave the Mosaic law to Israel in a “suzerain-vassal” treaty structure ([see our article on the Suzerain-vassal treaty](#) ). God gave Israel a self-governing structure, based on rule of law (following His commands), private property (honoring the persons and possessions of others, which is loving their neighbor), and consent of the governed (appointing judges).

This passage would confirm that Jesus desires this self-governing form of government also for New Testament believers. Just as God held the nation accountable to uphold the covenant/treaty they entered with God, Jesus holds the entire church accountable for listening to rather than disciplining and resisting false teachers. That would confirm that believers have the responsibility to only consent to follow those leaders or teachers who are walking in truth (2 John 1:7-8).

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>14</sup> 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*. <sup>15</sup> So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**