

*“Old Idols or a New Name” – Revelation Part 5*  
Revelation 2:12-17 (Letter to Pergamum)

A certain pastor was describing his first love: “She was beautiful, exciting, one of a kind! What memories. She was perfect ... in every way except one: the engine thermostat.” [P] (His first love was 1966 Ford Mustang) ... “Unfortunately, the engine had a thermostat that was too weak, and the car would eventually overheat. I had to replace it two or three times a year – a small price to pay for love. I soon became an expert on thermostats, at least for old Mustangs. I learned the basic difference between a thermostat and a thermometer: a thermostat *controls* temperature, while a thermometer *reflects* it. One *changes its environment*, the other *becomes like it*.” (Dr. Jim Denison)

What we are in public is the thermometer. What we are in private is the thermostat. How healthy is your soul’s thermostat? Because if it fails, pretty soon our engine overheats and we shut down [P] We’re going to work on our spiritual thermostats today, because they are the key to spiritual joy and victory; or to spiritual frustration and defeat.

Jesus’ letters to his seven churches are addressed in a circular route. From Smyrna, the road north followed the coastline some 40 miles before turning in a northeastern direction. About 10 miles inland from the Aegean Sea stood the city of *Pergamum*.

Because of her inland location, the city could never attain the commercial importance of Ephesus and Smyrna, but in political prestige she surpassed them both. If Ephesus with her trade and wealth was the New York City of Asia, and Smyrna with her beauty and culture was their San Francisco, then Pergamum with her political significance was their D.C.

Built on a cone-shaped hill a thousand feet in height, Pergamum dominated the valley below. From this height her inhabitants could spot the sea from over 10 miles away. Her name in Greek means “citadel,” and she was. A citadel of evil, that is.

Here are Jesus’ opening words to the church in Pergamum: “*I know where you live—where Satan has his throne.*” (13) Not necessarily the greeting I’d want to hear. Why does Jesus flat out call Pergamum the place of Satan’s throne? The reason was simple: this was the seat of emperor worship on the continent of Asia Minor.

In 29 B.C. Pergamum became the first city on earth to build a temple to the worship of a living emperor. When they became the capital of the Empire on the continent, such emperor worship became the mandatory requirement of every inhabitant.

Once a year, every resident was required to bow before a bust of Caesar, burn a pinch of incense as a sacrifice, and say “Caesar is Lord.” The person then received a certificate proving that the sacrifice had been made, and was required to carry it at all times to show to any who demanded it.

It was in the midst of such threat that Jesus reassures them in the rest of v. 13: “*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.*” It was here that Antipas, the only person named in the entire Book of Revelation, refused to worship Caesar and died for his faith. His name means “against all,” a commitment he honored with his death.

Every other Christian in Pergamum could expect the same fate. If parents would not deny Christ, their children were brought to the temple and killed, unless their mother and father worshiped Caesar. What would they do? What would we do?

Romans 12:1-2 takes on a whole other level of meaning in such a day of danger: “*Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” To not conform to the ways of this world, but to give ourselves totally to God – in love, in trust, and in obedience. Why is this so hard for us?  
[P]

Many talk and act as if their faith is a private thing, a kind of spiritual hobby. But who would be willing to sacrifice all for such a thing? I enjoy comic books, but I’m not willing to die for my collection. I have long admired C. S. Lewis, but I’m not going to lose my job to defend his theological arguments.

In a world which separates the spiritual and the secular, Sunday and Monday, church and the “real world,” why pay a price to follow Jesus in public? Because *such an integrated commitment to him is the only way the Christian faith works.* When I separate God from Monday, I forfeit what he can do in my working, serving, giving, and living.

Are you paying a price to follow Jesus in public? When last did it cost you something to stand for him? A client, because you would not compromise your integrity? A friend, because you would not do what he or she wanted to do? When last did you share your faith? When last did you take an unpopular stand for him? It will cost us something to serve Jesus in a watching world that rejects the call and cost of being a disciple of Christ. But we gain far more than we lose. [Pause]

So that's the public part of faith, the *thermometer* everyone can see. Christians in Pergamum were doing well in this regard. But there's more to their story – and ours.

Jesus' letter continues: "*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 by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality*" (v. 14).

Again, what's that about? Back in the book of Numbers, Balak, the king of Moab, tried to get Balaam, the Hebrew prophet, to curse Israel; but he refused. However, Balaam did even worse. He arranged a plan whereby the daughters of the Moabites seduced the men of Israel. Then these women led them to sacrifice to the pagan god of Moab and worship him (Num. 22-25). From then to now, *Balaam stands for the deception of idolatry*.

Some examples: It is idolatrous to adopt unethical business practices, for this puts money before the Lord. It is idolatrous to commit sexual immorality, for this dishonors the Spirit of God who dwells in us. It is idolatrous to misuse the name of God, to slander or to lie, for this dishonors God & his people. Every act that places our way above His way is idolatry.

Then Jesus warns them: "*You also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans*" (v. 15). This is the second time in the book that the Nicolaitans are mentioned. They were an early heresy which taught that physical actions do not affect our spiritual lives. And so we can be involved in physical sin without spiritual consequence. We can cheat on our taxes; engage in pornography; slur another because of the clothes they wear or the color of their skin, and still keep our souls intact. That is a lie – another deception coming from the throne of Satan. The world may not see that our thermostat is leaking, but it is. And soon the engine will be ruined.

Eighty percent of the warships sunk during WWII were attacked by submarines. Just because we cannot see the danger doesn't mean we're safe. The danger is very real.

Consider Proverbs 26:27: *"If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him."* *Don't diminish the danger, deception, and destination of sin.*

David's adultery is known to 30 centuries of history. Even if we don't see the sin itself, we see its effects. Alzheimer's affects the patient long before it is diagnosed. Lung cancer shortens your breath before it is discovered. Secret sin affects us in ways we may not realize at the time. And it creates a sense of hypocrisy that plagues us all through our days.

Why is this true? Because, as Jesus said in Jn. 15:4, the branch must be connected to the Vine to bear fruit. Are we abiding in Christ, or are we abiding in the world? Are we driven by the patterns of our culture or by the power of our King?

Churchill said that an army travels on its stomach to supply lines that win the war. Christians travel on their knees – our connection with Jesus wins the spiritual war. Secret sin stifles that relationship, cutting us off from the joy and peace and abundant life found in Christ. And the results, over time, are disastrous.

So Jesus says, *"Repent! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth"* (v. 16). At the beginning of this letter to his church, Jesus identified himself as the One who has *"the sharp double-edged sword."* Verse 16 adds what we learned from chapter 1 – that this sword is the *sword of his mouth* – that as the Messiah who *possesses perfect righteousness*, he is the one worthy to *pronounce perfect justice*. And now he tells them that he stands ready to do so.

The call to his beloved is clear: *If we don't deal with our sin, Jesus will.* He will do whatever it takes to remove the malignancy in our souls. Any loving father will do whatever it takes to rid his child of disease. You would; I would; God will. [P]

But then Jesus offers those words again: *"To the one who is victorious"* – who counts the cost of faithfulness – who pursues their First Love rather than the fallen word, Jesus promises to give *"the hidden manna."* This reference to "manna" seems to come out of nowhere – kind of like that first manna that the Israelites woke up to in the wilderness!

But it wasn't out of nowhere – it was the bread of heaven, provided by the Lord to sustain them day by day, year after year.

Of all things to promise them, why manna? [P] Do you remember just a few verses back where Jesus rejected those following in the footsteps of the ones deceived into idolatry, eating the *food* sacrificed to idols! Here, Jesus proclaims: “To those who reject the false gods of this world, who choose to hunger after Me, the Bread of Heaven, I will give you the hidden manna – I will give you of myself. I will sustain you day by day in the harsh, threatening, uncertain world in which you live.”

But Jesus promises more than that: “*I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it.*” This also may sound strange; but its significance is profound. The meaning of this would have been much clearer to the first century listener than today's reader. Such a stone had a name and a purpose. It was called a *tessera* – a stone inscribed with words or symbols, often serving as an invitation to a great banquet. So Jesus not only promises the daily manna we need to be sustained and to endure in this world. His promise extends into the world to come: “My provision for you will be eternal! You, my Bride, will dine with Me at my banquet table forever!”

But this stone has even more significance! It's *white*, which symbolizes purity. And Jesus says there will be “*a new name written on it.*” This points back to Isaiah 62:2 – “*The nations will see your vindication, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand ... No longer will they call you Deserted. Your land will be called Beulah, for the LORD will take delight in you ... As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.*” (62:2-6)

Why are we able to be his spotless Bride, welcome at his table forever? Because he has *vindicated* us! The Bridegroom is also the Lamb who was slain for us. This is where it gets even more amazing! Tessera stones were also used by jurors in criminal cases – a white stone meant acquittal! [P]

Jesus gives us a white stone with a new name on it so that we know that his atoning death and victorious resurrection have removed our guilt and shame.

Did you catch how the Lord's promise in Isaiah declared all these meanings of the tessera stone? Because of *him*, we are vindicated once and for all eternity. Because of *him*, we will always have a place at his table. Because of *him*, we are given a new name – no longer will we be called *Deserted* – forever we will be known as his *Delight!* [Pause] Who knew a little white stone could mean so very much! What a promise from our Savior! [P]

So, we've looked at three of the seven letters so far. You've probably noticed a pattern in each one – Jesus offers both stern warnings to those forsaking and precious promises to those enduring. We may be tempted to read and focus on the promise verses, while avoiding the warning ones. But that is like ignoring the spiritual thermostat until it no longer functions, and we are unable to see the damage that is happening to our souls.

Where do you find yourself in Pergamum – *deceived* by the idols of our age ... or *dependent* on the One who gives us a new name? Is there some sin keeping you from the presence and power of Jesus? Confess it to him. Return to him. Let him restore you. All so that your joyful witness can shine all the more distinctly in this desperate world.