

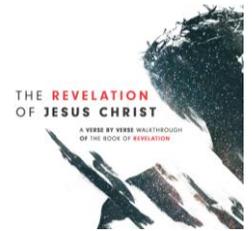
Title: Revelation, Part 7: Have you had a Spiritual Checkup lately?

Speaker: Charles Stone

Passage: Rev. 2.12-17

Big idea: The persecuted church in Pergamum reveals three key questions that help us appraise our spiritual health.

Memory verse of the month: Rev. 2:4-5 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.



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A universal desire we all have is to be physically healthy, right? There are several ways the experts tell us that helps us do that.

We should get enough **sleep**.

We should **eat** healthy.

We should **exercise**.

We should manage our **stress** levels.

We should take **time off** to recharge like vacations, weekly days off, breaks during the day.

We should take **vitamins**.

And we should get regular **checkups** from our doctor. And so on.

We just intuitively know some of these things that contribute to good health. These things make sense. Whether we do those things, however, is another matter.

But just as we should pay attention to our physical health, we must also pay attention to our **spiritual health**.

That's the focus of today's message in this series on Revelation.

We're in a section that address various ancient churches in western Turkey and the problems they were facing which are like the problems we face today. Today we're looking at city called Pergamum. And from each of the messages to these cities, we are learning spiritual truths.

**Big idea: The persecuted church in Pergamum reveals three key questions that help us appraise our spiritual health.**

Spiritual health is just as or perhaps even more important than physical health.

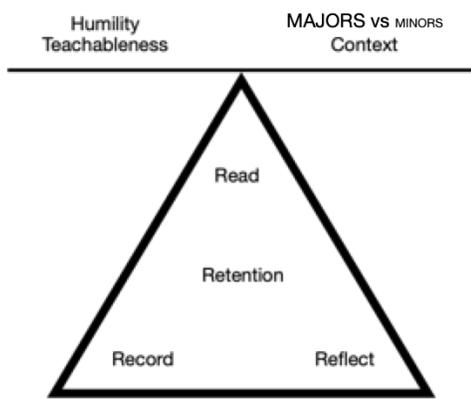
Pergamum was considered at the time to be the greatest city in Asia. This is a model of what it probably looked like. It was a city given the rare power of capital punishment which was symbolized by the sword. It was known for its great library of over 200,000 scrolls and we even get the name parchment from Pergamum. Parchment is made from animal skins and it was used like our paper. Many pagan temples existed there.

One of them was the temple of asclepius, the Greek god of healing. People from all over the world would come to be healed at this temple which was the nearest thing to a hospital in the ancient world. The task of healing was shared by priests and doctors and this so-called god, asclepius represented by this symbol: **(snake)**



What symbol in today's world does that look like? It's the modern symbol of **medicine** seen on doctors' shirts and RX pads and so forth. Back then, to the Christians this symbol stood for evil but it stood for healing to the populace.

Before we jump into the Scripture today, don't forget this diagram that visualizes how to get the most from this series. It's called the retention triangle.



**Read** the passage.

**Record** by taking notes.

**Reflect** over what you read from the scripture or your notes.

Read and study with **humility** as we may lovingly disagree with each other if we have different perspectives.

Stay **teachable**.

Focus on **the MAJORS vs the minors** by keeping the big picture in mind and not fixating on minor details.

Keep **context** in mind. That is, allow other parts of scripture to illuminate meaning and remember that this book was written in a specific historical context to the early church that was facing persecution.

So, let's read this passage.

[Rev. 2.12-17](#)

<sup>12</sup> "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.

<sup>13</sup> 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, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. <sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there 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. <sup>15</sup> Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup> Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

**Rev. 2:12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:**

Angel could have meant an angel assigned to this church or because angel means messenger it could also mean the pastor of this church.

**These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword.**

Think about a sword.

One of the TV shows I enjoy watching is called **Forged in Fire**. It's definitely a guy show. The show is built around these experts in ancient warfare weaponry. The producers bring **blacksmiths** into a well-equipped forge where they tape the show. These blacksmiths compete with each other to create swords, knives, and other older types of warfare weapons.

They start with easier tasks like, create a short knife out of these steel balls. Based on their work the judges eliminate blacksmiths until two of them remain. Those 2 then go back to their home forges for 3-4 days to create something elaborate like this **sword**.

These judges test these swords for strength and sharpness and the one with the best sword wins \$10,000 as the Forged in Fire champion. And some of those tests are brutal on the sword. There are women blacksmiths who have won as well.

Swords and images of swords were everywhere in the Roman empire. They pictured might and judgment. And, Roman governors were divided into two classes, those who had the right of the sword, that is capital punishment, they could execute people as they saw fit, and the other class were those who couldn't. Pergamum had this right and could at any moment use it against the Christians which apparently, they did.

So, with this contextual understanding, we need to interpret this image of the sword coming out of Jesus' mouth symbolically rather than literally. This was part of the image of Jesus that John saw in the dream earlier recorded in Revelation.

Jesus does not have an actual sword coming out of his mouth. It was an image in this vision given to John. Rather, it means that Jesus has the last word on judgement. The sword reminds us of his judicial authority over the church and the kingdom of darkness. It's a reminder to us that He is truly the all-powerful ruler. And for these persecuted Christians, they needed to be reminded of that in this city with the power of the sword.

Also, Jesus words can do spiritually what double-edged sword can do physically, slice and penetrate. His words are as piercing as a sword.

The writer of Hebrews describes the Bible in this way.

*Heb. 4:12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

The Bible is like no other book. It is God originated. We call it the word of God because it records God's words for us. And its message has power. It is living, a quality no other book has. It has active power in our lives. It gets to the very heart of the issue. It goes deep. It judges our thoughts and attitudes. It convicts us of sin and invites us to himself. Paul describes it as one of the tools of spiritual warfare.

*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph 6.17)*

**<sup>13</sup> I know where you live—where Satan has his throne.**

Did he mean that satan had a literal throne there. No. But, this city was a center of many pagan gods including a large temple to the father of the gods, Zeus.(temple of zeus)

He's not so much referring to their physical address, their gps coordinates, or a physical throne. Rather, Jesus is acknowledging that he knows the difficulties they face. It was difficult to spiritually stand strong in a culture where all this idol worship took place. So he labels it where satan's throne is, maybe relating it to Zeus's temple being there.

Their response showed that you can be strong in difficult, tempting circumstances. Here's what he says.

**Yet you remain true to my name. 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—where Satan lives.**

He is commending them for remaining true to Himself even in really bad circumstances. They didn't flinch in the fact of what happened.

Renounce points to a definite crisis rather than ongoing persecution. And that crisis was this, the murder of a Christian for their faith, martyrdom.

We know nothing further about Antipas except that he was probably one of the first or the most notable martyr at the time. Jesus speaks very highly of this saint who gave his life for Jesus. He even used the description for himself, faithful witness.

But, there are some issues in this church

**<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there 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.**

John makes over 500 allusions to the OT in Revelation. This is one of them. Here is what was happening.

Some in the church had been worn down by the financial and social penalties of not giving in to the public pressure of worshipping Ceasar and participating in the sexual immorality involved in worshipping the false gods.

Balak was the king of an area called Moab in OT days and when the Israelites once approached his borders, he feared them. So, he hired a *prophet for hire* to pronounce a curse over the Israelites as they believed that could help them win a battle. Balaam, the prophet, inquired of God and God said don't do it. Balaam told that the king. The king offered more money. The prophet said he could only say what God allowed him to say.

Balaam still wanted the money so he began to think of ways he could still accomplish what the king wanted. Was there some way he could still pronounce a curse? So he had an idea. If he could lead the Israelites into idolatry, which involved sexual immorality, then God himself would judge them and the same effect would occur. So, this prophet advised the king to have some of the prostitutes in Moab go to the Israelites, draw them into sexual immorality and idolatry and then God would bring judgement on them. So, the same net effect without him actually having to pronounce judgment.

Back to Pergamum, there were a few in this church who were guilty of doing a similar thing, causing other people to fall into sin. These were the ones holding to the teaching of Balaam.

The majority, however, were not encouraging others to do that, but they were guilty of overlooking that sin. They remained silent and their silence inferred agreement which resulted in others stumbling in their faith.

How could they not see that was bad? Well, for example, much like our culture's view of sex that pretty much says any kind of sexual expression is ok. How does a culture drift that far? We get acclimated and accustomed to it by seeing it in our entertainment on TV and movies and pretty much everywhere that it no longer bothers us. I believe that happened here. What was wrong became tolerated then became common then was mainstreamed and then was honored and lauded. Think about that process today. Famous people today who flaunt their crazy sexual proclivities are lauded and honored by the media for being true to themselves even they are contrary to longstanding biblical sexual ethics that had been embraced by society for a long time and even in the face of the science that speaks of the detrimental effects of such sexual expression.

This decline happens over time. It's a slow inside job of steady erosion. We see this in the decline of the United Church in Canada. I read a summary about the history of that church over the decades and saw how each decade drifted further and further away from Biblical truth. In 1965 membership stood at one million, sixty two thousand and six: 1,062,006. It is now 388,000. It is a dying denomination and you see the evidence in many former United church buildings that are used for anything but worship.

It's the **frog** in the kettle syndrome. You put a frog in a kettle of cool water, he won't jump out. If you slowly raise the temperature he won't notice the heat rising until it's too late and eventually he gets cooked. This is what happens when slowly, methodically we put up with what we once didn't tolerate until we get in big trouble.

**<sup>16</sup> Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.**

There are two levels of sin that Jesus speaks against. First, He speaks against those participating. He condemns their sin. Second, it's against those who tolerate it, put up with it, and overlook it.

They all are to repent, turn from their sin, and stop sinning. And if they don't Jesus will bring judgment on those who are causing others to stumble and involved in really bad sin.

**<sup>17</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes,**

*They must overcome* means that both the serious compromisers of the faith and the overlookers need to listen up, heed, and turn.

And he gives 3 promises to his faithful followers. The first one is what he calls manna.

- **Manna** reminds us that God promises to give us spiritual food. Manna was this cake like food that God miraculously provided the Israelites when they were wandering in the desert. It may have looked like a sweet wafer cake. It literally means *what is it*. It's God's promise to us that just like he fed the Israelites, he gives us spiritual food to feed our souls when we need it because Jesus is called the bread of life.
- He then says he give those who overcome a **white stone**. White reminds us of this new cleanness that we have in Christ, as white as snow, a righteousness that he gives us based on Jesus' righteousness. A white stone was seen as a token of favor.
- Then he says we get a **new name**. Names in those days meant much more than a designation. They reflected your very identity or character. A new name reminds us that we have a new identity, status, and intimacy with God.

Let's go back to the big idea...

**Big idea:** The persecuted church in Pergamum reveals three key questions that helps us appraise our spiritual health.

**Jesus knows our challenges better than we do, so...**

**Question 1: Do I usually turn to him first for wisdom or to myself?**

Jesus knew exactly what they faced in that church in a culture consumed with idol worship. The father of all those Greek gods had his own temple there. It was satan's throne. And he wasn't telling them to escape, but to be people of conquest, standing strong in the midst of it. Think of it this way.

It's easier to be a consistent Christian in some circumstances compared to others, right? In some settings temptations are not as strong as in other settings. If what your group or friends believe or do is more aligned with God honoring behavior, it's easier to go along with that good behavior. The opposite is also true. If your group or friends believe or do bad stuff, it's harder to resist not going along with them. Peer and culture pressure is strong.

Yet, when we resist giving in to attitudes and actions contrary to what pleases God, we get stronger. We grow. We become a testimony to the world about Jesus' way. Jesus is acknowledging to this church that he knows they are in a difficult context but to be strong in that context. Don't run away from it. Rather, first turn to me and I will show you what you need to do.

Now, I'm a problem solver and fixer. This concept is a big challenge for me. I can define a problem and figure out a solution pretty quickly. But in doing so, my tendency is to overlook checking in with the Lord first. Lord, what do you want? What should I do here? How do I respond in this situation? How do I keep from yielding to temptation? You know the situation better than I do. So sometimes I struggle with getting the order wrong. How about you?

Jesus knows everything about us, and our daily circumstances, and he wants us to first turn to him.

And at the end of this section, he reminds us of his provision we just saw, the manna (he will give us spiritual food), the white stone (we have a new imputed righteousness), and the new name (we have a new identity in God and status before him).

**Jesus expects us to stay spiritually sensitive to sin and righteousness, so....**

**Question 2: Have I allowed myself to become calloused to subtle sin in my life?**

Have you ever gotten a callous on your hand? You know how they are formed? Spring comes around and you're planting your garden and the tools you use to prepare your soil creates these red, pain spots, even blisters on your hand. It hurts. But you still have to work in your garden so the next day you work in the garden and hands hurt a bit less. Each day you work in your garden they hurt less and less until they quit hurting. What happened? Hard skin areas formed over those sensitive places and removed the sensitivity.

That's how spiritual callousness happens. At one time we were very sensitive about doing or saying certain things or having attitudes that were wrong because the Holy Spirit convicted us. We felt guilty because we were wrong. But the more we do them, the less conviction we feel so that over time, we no longer feel that conviction.

So when we become less sensitive to sin in our lives (attitudes, outright behaviors, words we use, or the tone we use) when we tolerate it more and more in our lives, not only do we become less sensitive to the sin and less aware of it but a parallel process is happening. We actually become less sensitive to the nudging of the Holy Spirit. And not just in that particular area. We dull the sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's leading and convicting influence and make it more difficult to sense his gentle voice in our lives. It's a personal application of the **frog in the kettle syndrome**.

The Bible tells us that this process is very real.

*Heb. 3: <sup>12</sup> See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*

What had happened in this church? They didn't deny Christ. They stayed committed to the fundamentals. They went to church. They gave. They served. But they had become calloused to some sins. They had lost their sensitivity to sin evidenced in the fact that for some it didn't even register that this group encouraging others into immorality was clearly compromising. Their callousness resulted in toleration.

Maybe the frog in the kettle syndrome has not affect you. But, maybe it has. What are some areas where this might be true?

Maybe its language you use that you once didn't use. Maybe it's the movies with lots of sex and language that at one time really bothered you but now, not so much. Maybe it's fudging the truth but at one time you never did that. Maybe it's harboring an unforgiving attitude toward someone which you didn't do before.

I don't mean being hyper vigilant about this. We can't second guess everything we do or constantly worry or ruminate, "did I just sin without realizing it." But pay attention to your life. Put good people around you. Get plenty of spiritual food by reading the Bible, praying, coming to church when we can gather again, being involved in a group. And when you know you stumble, immediately admit it to God and he will cleanse you. If you need someone to lovingly hold you accountable, find someone.

**Jesus wants us to love others by sometimes intervening on their behalf, so...**

**Question 3: Is there someone He is prompting me to further engage with?**

Jesus was telling those in this church who had begun to tolerate this sin to repent and was telling those who were outright sinning to repent. The implication is that those who weren't involved in this sinful behavior were to intervene, get involved with those people so that it stopped. If they didn't, severe consequences of judgment would come their way, described in Jesus' words this way.. *Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.*

You see, if some of those we love continue in their sinful and destructive ways, it may lead to very serious consequences. I'm not saying you are their spiritual police. I'm not saying to be judgmental. I am saying that love for those we care about who are doing things that are harmful to themselves and others and rejecting God should prompt us to risk further involvement in their lives.

*Friend, I love you and care about you. But if you continue this, it's sending you into places you don't want to go. How can I help?*

It's risky. But love risks. And when we step outside our comfort zones, we grow.

*Gal. 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*

**Three questions:**

- 1. Do I usually turn to him first for wisdom or to myself?**
- 2. Have I allowed myself to become calloused to subtle sin in my life?**
- 3. Is there someone He is prompting me to further engage with?**

Which question most resonated with you?

To help you think more deeply about your spiritual health, we created a tool for you today and I encourage you to use it this week. It comes from an anonymously written short booklet called Not I but Christ captured in a blog post I got permission to use. We have reproduced it and you can download one. It is filled with thought provoking questions that can potentially uncover some of these areas we must deal with.

So, download it, and take 30 minutes or so and slowly read through it and reflect on it and allow the Holy Spirit to challenge your heart. The words in this little booklet will challenge you.