

The Seven Letters of Highly Effective Churches – Smyrna

17th Sunday after Pentecost

September 27, 2009

We are continuing with our series, “The Seven Letters of Highly Effective Churches” with a look at a unique letter Jesus had sent to the church in the town of Smyrna. I invite you to open your Bibles with me to the book of Revelation, chapter 2, verses 8-11.

The reason this letter is unique among the other seven letters, is because it’s one of two letters that doesn’t have a direct rebuke from Jesus like we saw last week in the letter to the church at Ephesus where Jesus said, “I hold this against you...” This doesn’t mean this church didn’t need correction and guidance though! In fact, we still see where Jesus tells them what He wants them to do in light of the world around them.

As is our pattern, let’s look at the context. The book of Revelation was written by the last living inner 12 disciples of Jesus, John. While on the prison island of Patmos, Jesus came to John and first told him what to write to the seven churches, and then showed him events yet to come. Smyrna is located about 35 miles north of the church we look at last week, Ephesus. Most likely, the ‘angel’ or Pastor of the church in Smyrna was Polycarp. That name may sound a little familiar to some of you – Polycarp was the student of the Apostle John... as in the person to whom Jesus came to on the island of Patmos and instructed what to write in the book of Revelation.

This letter to the church in Smyrna is of dubious comfort. It gives praises, and then tells the people to get ready, because it’s going to get worse before it gets better. I don’t know about you, but I’m not sure I would have wanted to hear verse 10: *“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

Smyrna itself was a very rich city, much like the city of Ephesus. It had a population of around 100,000 at the time of the writing of the letter, and was noted as one of the most faithful cities to the Roman Empire. The thing about the Roman Empire at this time was that there was freedom of religion for all religions – except Christianity. Christians, with their insistence that Jesus is God and the only way to get to heaven, as well as their insistence that whatever Caesar in power at the time was not a god so they would not participate in emperor worship, were outcasts and targets for persecution and death. Because the Christians would not submit to the sins of the world around them, they were excluded from society, including employment opportunities. This is why Jesus says, “I know your poverty.” You can make a note in your Bibles; the Greek word here means “abject poverty, possessing absolutely nothing.”

So, that was the situation the Christians in Smyrna found themselves in. There are two things I'd like us to walk away with today – a word of comfort, and a word of instruction.

The word (or words!) of comfort are simply this: "I know." Go ahead and underline that first part of verse nine: "*I know your afflictions and your poverty.*" He knows. Jesus knows what we go through, what we experience and what we struggle with.

You can write Isaiah 53:3 in the margin next to verse 9 – "*He was despised and rejected by people, (He was) One who experienced pain and was acquainted with illness; people hid their faces from Him; He was despised, and we considered Him insignificant.*"¹

Jesus knows. Did you hear me this morning? He *knows*. He knows what you've experienced. He knows the cruel actions, the careless words, the hurtful comments thrown at you. He knows the cry of the heart that has been bruised. He knows what it is to feel alone, abandoned and rejected. He knows because He's been there.

Not only this, but He knows what it is for us to be His followers in a world that has turned its collective back on Him in favor of making its own way. He knows how hard it can be to remain in Him, to remain true to Him when everything around us tells us we are foolish and close-minded to be like the Christians in Smyrna and insist that what it says in Acts 4:12 is true: "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*"

Do you know what He tells you, Christian, when you are being told to abandon your faith; when you are hearing how Christianity is not true; when you are tempted to compromise a little here and a little there? You can make a note of these verses in your Bibles, too. Matthew 5:10-12 says, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"

Why do Christians have times of suffering though? Why can't we be immune? We've mentioned this before, but it might be good to review it again:

First, sometimes God allows suffering to happen to draw people to Christ. Sometimes it's because of the difficulties that people turn to Christ and finally fall on Him with all the brokenness and pain, and receive the healing of their heart that had been so desperately needed.

Sometimes God allows difficulties to mature and deepen our faith. Very often the way we 'grow up' in our faith is when we've had to rely on it, and found it lacking! That's when we've turned to our God and dug into His Word even more, and our faith was strengthened.

¹ From the NET version of the Bible.

A third reason why God allows suffering is to make our lives more fruitful. When we've come close to Christ and had a deepening and maturing faith, the results of that new faith is shown in our lives, which in turn are used to bring more people to Christ.

Finally, God can use suffering to bring about His good purpose and plan. Though we may not understand why we go through the things we do, God not only understands but promises in Romans 8:28, *"In all things God works for the good of those who love him."*

The point is, He knows. Jesus knows and He makes a promise: hold on – you are blessed, and the best is yet to come.

That leads us right into the second thing today, and the message to the church at Smyrna and to us, too: don't give in to the world. This is the instruction to the church at Smyrna, and the instruction to the Christian church today – don't compromise the truth, don't give in. Be faithful.

"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death."

Be faithful to Christ. Be faithful to His word He has given us. Stand firm on His Word.

When we are tempted to compromise – stand firm.

When we are teased, made fun of, laughed at and ridiculed for calling on the name of Jesus – stand firm.

When people say Christians are narrow-minded and backwards – don't compromise the truth.

When God's Holy Word is set aside as not being relevant to today's world – don't give in: the culture of the day doesn't change God's Word, God's Word changes the culture. Make a note of 2nd Timothy 3:16, *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."*

Last week we saw the first instruction was to love Jesus for who He is – our Savior, and for what He calls us to – lives lived in confession, repentance, prayer, Bible reading, fellowship and worship.

This week the instruction is simply this: Be faithful. Be faithful to the unchanging truth of the Word of God without compromise.

Be faithful, even if it means losing your life, Jesus says, and I'll give You the Crown of Life. You weren't made for this world, you were made for My World. Be faithful.

Would you pray with me please?

Jesus, thank You for this second letter in Revelation. Thank You for revealing Your heart to us and reminding us that You know what we are experiencing in this life. Your heart breaks with us and for us when we experience times of suffering.

Holy Spirit, come to Your Church. Help us to remain faithful to the Holy Scriptures You wrote, to the Holy, perfect words of love and instruction. Help us not to compromise, but rather, to remain firmly rooted in the crystal clear Word You've given.

Amen.