

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Lenten Letters*, No. 2

**Riches in Poverty**

March 8, 2020 (AM)

*Revelation 2:8-11*

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: "These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. <sup>9</sup> I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. <sup>10</sup> 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 life as your victor's crown. <sup>11</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death."

We're in Revelation, Chapter 2, again this morning, if you'd like to turn there with me. We are looking today at Jesus' words to the body of Christ at Smyrna, which is today the city of Izmir, Turkey.

It's interesting that Jesus should introduce Himself here as the one who died and who came to life again. That is a statement that would have certainly captured the attention of anyone in Smyrna who knew their city's history.

Smyrna was one of the most beautiful cities of Asia in its day. Like her neighbor, Ephesus, Smyrna was a port city situated between the sea and a great hill behind her. On this hill magnificent buildings were built, rising above the water, as ancients have said, like a great crown. Always there were pleasant breezes blowing through her streets from the sea, and water flowing down the mountain behind fed elaborate fountains in the squares.

Smyrna was competitive with Ephesus in nearly every way: in size, in diversity, in sport and culture, and also, unfortunately, in ungodly worldliness. Temple after temple of idols lined its streets. Because Smyrna was fiercely loyal to Rome, it was the first city to dedicate a statue to Roma, the goddess of Rome. Describing all this, someone wrote, "In Smyrna we find the splendor of heathen culture and pagan religion at its highest and most magnificent."

Smyrna was an ancient city. Her foundations reach back to the 11th century BC. Somewhere near 600 BC, it was invaded and destroyed, and its population was scattered. The city itself lay dead and in ruins for over 300 years, until a fellow by the name of Lysimachus rebuilt it as one of the first architecturally planned cities of its day, with wide streets and well-conceived neighborhoods.

You see, by Jesus introducing Himself as the one who died and came to life again, it's as if He's saying, "I can relate to you in more ways than you know."

The people of Smyrna loved their city and they loved their nation, and in return for their dedication, Rome granted Smyrna the status of "free city," allowing it to self-govern, which meant that Rome would stay out of their business, unless, of course, they did something that undermined Rome's authority.

And this is precisely where the Christians of Smyrna fell into trouble.

Of course, Christianity is, and has always been, *evangelical* at heart. Wherever the Christian faith is true, it tends to naturally reproduce itself. People who discover the reality of God through the grace of Jesus just naturally share what they've found and *whom* they've found with those around them, those who are looking for love and forgiveness and purpose and answers to those big questions of life. That's really how the church has always grown and spread.

You can have your kicking worship services; you can have program after program after program; you can fill arenas and stadiums. But the fact is, and has always been, more people truly find Jesus through the relational witness of good Christian friends than in any other way.

And that's what was happening in Smyrna. The Christians there were telling others about Jesus and what He'd done for them – how He'd changed their lives, and people were coming to Christ.

And someone didn't like that.

Who didn't like it?

Well, strangely – and maybe surprisingly – it was the Jews of Smyrna who didn't like that, and here's why.

I said that Smyrna was a free city, which meant it could govern itself, and according to Roman law, it would remain free so long as it posed no threat to the ultimate rule of Rome.

And in Smyrna, Judaism was a legal, permissible religion that was allowed to operate as it chose to a large degree, under two conditions: First...it was not allowed to proselytize – it was not allowed to try to convince Romans to become Jewish in faith.

And second, they could not do anything or act in any way as to appear to threaten the ultimate rule of Rome.

As long as those two conditions were kept, then all was well.

But you see, here come these Christians who were, first, talking to others about Jesus – and leading people to follow Jesus – and second, they were out there telling people that "Jesus is their Lord."

And in doing these things, they were breaking the two cardinal rules of getting along with Rome.

They told people about Jesus because, well, when you find that one thing that makes your existence complete – that you've looked for all your life – you just naturally talk about that.

And, you see, they could no longer say that Caesar was Lord, because Jesus was their Lord.

Now, it's not like they were out there staging big protests or uprisings – they weren't gathering with signs in the city squares demanding their rights.

They weren't out to upend the government, at least not through the means of the world.

But just the same, they knew that if it came to a point of decision about either doing what *Jesus* wanted or doing what *Caesar* wanted, they would choose Jesus' way, because Jesus being Lord was part of their gospel.

Honestly, sometimes I wonder if it's still part of ours.

I wonder if there aren't people – maybe lots of people – in churches across our nation today who really do think that they can have *multiple lords* in their lives, you know? People have convinced themselves that, "Oh sure, Jesus is Lord, but so is Trump and so is my boss at work and so is my wife or my husband – *and so am I.*" That's the big one, isn't it? Self is lord. "I can do as I please – I can choose as I will – I can be my own Lord and still be a Christian."

Ah, but you see, that's not the way it works. That's the way that we, especially in America, have managed to domesticate the gospel.

But those Christians at Smyrna – they did not do that.

They weren't out looking for a fight. They supported their government in every way they could, but there were lines they could not cross, and one of those lines was they just could not any longer declare Caesar as Lord.

So why were the Jews upset about this?

Because Christians were still considered a sub-sect of Judaism. In fact, probably many of the Christians of Smyrna were converted Jews. And as Christianity spread, and word of the Christians' evangelism and their declaration of Jesus as Lord got back to the Roman community leaders, well, they started to lean on the Jews who were very much a part of society there. They started saying to the Jews in big government and big business, "Hey, those Jesus followers, they are part of your religion. What are they doing out there bringing down Caesar and lifting up this Jesus?"

And, of course, that put those Jews in a bad place. It made them guilty by association – and they didn't want to be associated with the Christians in the first place!

So that's what fed their animosity, you see? The Christian witness threatened the Jews' safety and well-being and their ability to be free and to continue to practice their faith. They knew this looked like treason to Rome, and they knew that Rome would come down on *them* if they didn't do something.

That's why they led the charge against the Christians in Smyrna. And not only in Smyrna. Scripture says they did that in other places too – they stirred up people against the Christians in Antioch, in Iconium, in Lystra and in Thessalonica.

Now, I'm not promoting anti-semitism here. God loves Jews and He wants them to be redeemed.

But it's Jesus, right there in verse 9, who calls them, in Smyrna, "the synagogue of Satan."

Actually, Jesus makes a distinction that those Jews who were stirring up animosity against the Christians were not really, true Jews. You see there, Jesus says, "*I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*" [Rev. 2:9b]

*True people of God would not do what they were doing to other people of God.* That's what Jesus means here.

And the fact that He calls them a "synagogue of Satan;" that's about as harsh as Jesus ever is.

He does that because a favorite expression of the Jews was to refer to themselves as "the assembly of the Lord." And the word "synagogue" comes from the Greek word meaning "assembly." So, it's as if Jesus says here, "You call yourselves the 'assembly of the Lord,' but really, you who are working against the church – you are 'the assembly of the devil.'"

So, this is what the Christians at Smyrna faced: slanderous information designed to take them down being passed on to the government by their own spiritual relatives – for *their* own self-protection.

And the cost was high. Jesus mentions three specific costs the church was already facing and would face even more of in the future:

**First** is affliction.

The word there is *thlipsis*, which is a word that describes a pressure being applied. They were under pressure – a pressure designed to either crush them, or to crush the Jesus out of them. They lived under this, day and night.

The **second** thing they suffered is poverty.

In Greek, there are two words for poverty – the first word means that you have nothing extra.

The second word means you have nothing at all.

Jesus uses the second word here, saying that their choice to follow Him meant that they were stripped of nearly everything in terms of their worldly possessions.

And then the **third** is imprisonment.

Jesus says they'll be imprisoned – and for "ten days."

Now, we don't know this interpretation for sure, but you the number *ten* is symbolic in Scripture, kind of like the numbers *seven* and *twelve* are symbolic. *Ten* tends to mean a "completeness." So, it may be that Jesus is telling them that they'll be imprisoned for a time – for an amount of time that brings completeness in some way.

But regardless, the encouraging thing is, it will be a finite time...a *specific* time...that has an end. Their imprisonment for their faith will not last forever.

And what's more, if they are faithful during their confinement, even to the point of death, if need be, Jesus says that He "*will give (them) life as their victor's crown.*"

For those who are faithful to Jesus in confinement, Jesus will limit their imprisonment, and will then give them life without end.

And this is precisely why Jesus can say, as He does there in verse 9, that those Christians of Smyrna were rich – richer than they knew!

They may well have to live under this pressure for their faith.

They may suffer poverty for their faith.

They may even be sent to prison for their faith.

But in their faithfulness to Jesus, they have Jesus with them, and they have eternal life; and, there was nothing the Jews or Romans could do to take away those gifts – those riches.

You see, this is the living out of Jesus' special concern for the poor of our world, and especially so when their poverty comes because of their relentless allegiance to Him.

You probably have already noticed that there is no call to repent in Jesus' words to the church of Smyrna. There is only praise – along with the encouragement to stay faithful, no matter the pressure, no matter the poverty, no matter the prison.

And in that pressure, poverty and prison, Jesus gives the promise of His presence and of eternal life.

Were you ever going through a particularly hard time, and in the midst of it, you received a letter from someone that just seemed to say all the right things – that was so soothing and encouraging and inspiring that you kept it and read it over and over again?

This was that sort of letter to the Smyrnan Christians.

It was designed to be that sort of letter to us too.

Sometimes, in the midst of hardship and loss – even loss due to our commitment to Jesus – there comes that temptation to feel sorry for ourselves, to focus on the things we used to have, to begin to worry about the future and what might happen to us next. We're tempted at times even to give in to those things that the world around calls right and good.

Jesus says there's no point in that, because for those faithful to Him, even in loss, we are truly rich!

Why would anyone choose the temporary peace of this world when the alternative is eternal peace with God?

It may be that this very frame of mind was best lived out, coincidentally, by a fellow from Smyrna.

He had a strange name – Polycarp. He was a disciple of the Apostle John. He became bishop of the church at Smyrna, and he was executed in Smyrna for His faith on February 23, 155. His story is well known since it was recorded by church historian and Bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius.

It was the time of the public games, and in the crowd, a shout was heard, "Away with the atheists! Let Polycarp be brought!"

You see, Christians were the atheists, because our God could not be seen.

Polycarp could very likely have escaped, but he didn't try, because he'd had a dream where he saw a pillow burning with fire under his head. When he woke, he told his friends, "I will be burnt alive."

Once he was located, they came to take him, but before they did, he ordered that those who came for him be given a meal, which offered him one last hour for prayer.

Not even the police captain wanted to see Polycarp die, so on the journey into the city, even he pled with him, "What harm is it to say, 'Caesar is Lord' and to offer sacrifice to him and be saved?"

But Polycarp was adamant that for him, only Jesus was Lord.

When he entered the arena, the proconsul gave him the choice of cursing the name of Jesus and making sacrifice to Caesar – or death.

Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Jesus, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme the King who saved me?"

The proconsul then threatened him with burning, to which Polycarp replied, "You threaten me with a fire that burns for a time and is quickly quenched. Yet there is a fire that awaits the wicked in the judgment to come that is everlasting. Wait no longer – come and do what you will."

Even some of the persecutors tried to convince him to choose life, but Polycarp chose, instead, the presence of Jesus and eternal life. And as they piled the wood around him, Polycarp prayed this prayer:

"O Lord God Almighty, Father of Your beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, through whom we have received the knowledge of You, I bless You that You have counted me worthy of this day and hour, that I might be in the number of the martyrs. Among these may I be received before You today a rich and acceptable sacrifice, as You have beforehand prepared and revealed. I praise You for everything! I bless You – and I glorify You – both now and for the ages to come. Amen."

And Eusebius adds, "And when he had offered up his amen, the fire was lit."

Contrary to what some seem to believe, the life of following Jesus, though it be good news in the eternal sense, is not always good news in the temporal sense.

Yet who, in their right mind, would trade the eternal for that which is temporary?

Polycarp would not – and neither would those believers of Smyrna.

And Jesus celebrated them, you see? Jesus cheered them!

Those at Smyrna, and those in every other city in our world, who have Jesus only as their Lord – those who choose to give up their own peace and wealth and freedom, if need be, for His sake – say, along with the Apostle Paul, "*I count all things as loss compared to the surpassing excellence of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have lost all things.*" [Phil. 3:8]

For them and for their decision, Jesus cheers!

And He cheers still today for all who decide this.

For you, who, even this week, have not traded the eternal for the temporary – you who have suffered either pressure or poverty or prison, but have kept Jesus as your one and only Lord – and have paid a price for that choice, Jesus cheers for you! Jesus cheers for you!

May He so cheer for us all!

May the Spirit of God help you and me to be as faithful to Christ as the people of Smyrna were – that even though pressure, poverty or prison may come, we would remain faithful to Jesus as our one and only Lord.