

Second in the series “Church Are You Listening?” by Pastor Timothy Corder

How do you determine if a church is rich? Is it when it has a big staff, or a packed calendar of events and or ministries? Beautiful buildings and a bank account with big reserves. Are these the things we are to look for to know the church is rich?

Well I think most of you can see where I am coming from. It's not the bank account, the big staff, physical edifice or even the busyness of ministry. I propose that God's economy is different than that of the world and even often of many of us in the pews. The richness of the church we see in this letter is found in faithfulness to the one who loves you, to the one you love! TEXT

Let's look at the letter/scriptures this morning to the Church of Smyrna Rev. 2:8-11 second letter recording the word of our Lord written down by John the revelator. Before we rightly dissect this passage let me share a few notes from a week of study volumes of readings. Smyrna was a beautiful city in Asia Minor just about 40 miles north of Eph. the city of the church we spoke of last week.

Smyrna was one of the wealthiest cities in the region; it was referred to as the Flower of Asia, also the Crown of Asia. It had a long beautiful sea port and high hills that had many beautiful Temples, but temples dedicated to false gods. Smyrna had a stadium where famous games were held, and the largest Theater in all Asia Minor. Because of its long port it was very safe and merchants enjoyed docking and trading there. They even were able to raise a large chain across the harbor after the freighters were in, keeping out pirates! This city had been destroyed and rebuild thus had claimed to be brought back from the dead! A well planned out city at this point and dedicated to the worship of Rome. They were awarded the privilege to erect a temple to the God of the Spirit of Rome. Under emperor Domitian “Caesar worship” became compulsory.

So once a year every person had to burn incense and say these three words, “Caesar is Lord” publicly. When they did they would receive a certificate, which was required to get a job, to make a living.

This letter to the church in Smyrna is the shortest, and one of two where Jesus has no criticism, only commendation! That's rich! So who's talking to us: Jesus himself, the one who walks among the lampstands-the churches, among us! And Jesus says a couple of very important things about himself directly related to the situation that the church found themselves (relevance). 8“These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

The one who is telling this church not to fear is the one who was here before their problem existed; he walks among you and will be walking along side of you, long after this problem is over. “Church are you listening”_ I have been present with you before this trial began and will be with you when it's passed. In other words Jesus is not going anywhere! Isa. Said of God: 41:10 “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

The second powerful thing Jesus said to that church is: “I KNOW”! I know what you're going through. Please don't misunderstand this today; He is not just aware, having received a report from scouts. He knows empathetically, experientially. Jesus

knows because he went through the something's. Jesus knows what it is like to live in extreme poverty; he was homeless, for the Son of Man had no place to lay his head. Jesus was also blasphemed, goaded mocked and tortured then put to death! "Church are you listening", young people are you listening; Heb. 4:15

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

Not only does he know but he has conquered that which threatened this church; Jesus got victory over pain, over the Cross an instrument of death and even over death itself. And he assures us he will come and walk us into this same victory.

With that kind of introduction of the speaker, let's hear his address. Jesus is concerned with three things this church is undergoing. 1st) Affliction. The literal translation is Pressure- but not just the day to day that most of us experience. We might not be able to say "I know how you feel". This is the kind of pressure that is illustrated by a huge stone placed on an individual that they cannot get out from under and will slowly crush them. The one, who had the blood crushed out of him, understands that the church of Smyrna was being crushed out.

2nd they were also enduring extreme poverty. Remember that certificate that is issued for Caesar Worship- it was withheld for Jesus worship. They were crushed out of working, crushed out from being able to earn grocery money; many have even had their possessions and homes confiscated. Forced into begging for whatever they could get.

Many were starving, all because they refused to worship Caesar and insisted on following Jesus. They were dirt poor, yet Jesus said you are rich! They understood that the richest, the wellness and the life were held just over the temporal horizon in trust with Jesus. And Faithfulness was their access key to the trust!

3rd they also faced Blasphemy; both from the Romans but most of this came from the Jews—people who claimed to follow Jehovah but in reality were serving satan himself. I mean, they did everything they could to make it hard on the Nazarenes (what they called the earlier flowers). Here are some examples of the slanderous gossip they:

Since Christians shared communion that they said was representative of the body and blood of Jesus, Jews spread the rumor that Christians were cannibals.

Because the Christians called their common meal "The AGAPE FEAST" or "the LOVE FEAST" the Jews that the Christians gathered for orgies of lust and immorality.

Due to the fact that Christianity did in fact often split families, when some members of them became Christians and some did not, the Jews accused the Nazarenes of breaking up homes and "tampering with family relationships."

Jesus too was blasphemed! He was accused of casting out the devil by the devil! Time does not permit us to talk about the martyrdom of Polycarp and then millions others who stood faithful to Jesus.

What was Jesus' main message to these to whom he so well related?

Well, Jesus encourages these Smyrna Christians to do TWO things.

A. First, He says, “Do not be AFRAID.”

vs10: “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.”

Now—does that encouragement sound a bit strange? Wouldn’t you expect Jesus to say, “Fear not, hang in there, for I will alleviate your suffering.” Or, I’m going to put a stop to this.” Or... “Fear not—for I will destroy those who are blaspheming you!” But this is not what we hear from Jesus. Instead He said, “It’s going to get worse. In fact, the devil is going to throw some of you into prison.” Going to prison back then, meant torture and even death. Jesus doesn’t explain WHY—just that its bad and it’s going to get worse. And he attributed the action of those who did not receive him, as works of satan and the religious people who were not with him as of the synagogue of Satan.

B. The second thing Jesus says is, “Continue to be faithful—even to the point of IMPRISONMENT and DEATH.”

And as from that point on there were millions who died for their faith in Jesus...millions who like old Polycarp were faithful unto death.

How could they FEAR NOT—and BE FAITHFUL—even through suffering and persecution, even to the point of death? They put their faith in Him Who is the FIRST and the LAST. They put their trust in Jesus—Who triumphed over it all and promises us eternal life.

Do you remember what I told you about Smyrna earlier? Remember—it was called the “crown of Asia?”—well, Jesus KNEW about that claim—He walks in their midst and knows about the city in which they live so He says, “Be faithful and keep following Me no matter how hard it is—even if it costs you your life—because I have defeated death so I can and will give you a CROWN OF LIFE! The crown of Asia is nothing compared to what I give to those who put their faith in Me.”

And then, remember the residents of Smyrna bragged that their city came back from the dead. Well, Jesus says, “I’ve heard that one too—and bringing a CITY back—piling a few rocks on top of each other, that’s nothing! Anyone can do that. I can bring a PERSON back to life forever! And I’ll do that for you!”

And as Paul puts it in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

So we are HARD-PRESSED. When it comes to earthly joys some of us are poor right now. But are any of us RICH in eternal things—because we have learned that we can lean on JESUS in the difficulties of life...JESUS Who is the First and the Last and sovereign over everything. Jesus is more than a get out of jail free card we play, he is also the one who promised, and to those who overcome they will not be harmed in the second death (eternal dying). Described as suffering without end, darkness without light at the end of the tunnel! One thing for sure he knows you!
LET US PRAY