**BE FAITHFUL, EVEN TO THE POINT OF DEATH**

July 7, 2019

Revelation 2:1–11

Key Verse 2:10b “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.”

In today’s passage we begin our study of the prophetic messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor. As we study chapters 2 and 3, we find that each of these seven churches was unique. Though they were in historical places with particular situations, these churches are also universal examples for all believers of all time. In fact, as we read Jesus’ words to them, we may find ourselves in elements of each one. The characteristics of the seven churches are summarized as: Ephesus, loveless church; Smyrna, persecuted church; Pergamum, over-tolerant church; Thyatira, compromising church; Sardis, sleeping church; Philadelphia, church with opportunity; Laodicea, complacent church. Today we will look at the messages to the first two churches: Ephesus and Smyrna. In this study we want to think about what pleases Jesus and what displeases Jesus, and what his goals for his people are. We especially want to think about what he meant when he said, “Be faithful, even to the point of death.” May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

At the outset it is good to do a quick overview of all seven messages. Each message is like a mini “revelation” to that church. When we read them all, we can see a pattern. Every message begins by saying something unique about Jesus, a partial description of him taken from chapter 1. Then Jesus says what he knows about that particular church, and usually it is something encouraging. Next, he might mention what he has “against” them, a specific problem they have, and he tells them what to do about it. Finally, he always concludes with a promise to the one who is “victorious.” All seven messages emphasize listening to the words of Jesus. They all start by saying, “These are the words of…” They are the words of the most important one, Jesus. It is not just human advice, but words we should be taking most seriously. They all end by saying, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” When people go to church, they often hear various Bible passages and teachings. Over time, it can all start to sound the same. The more we hear without accepting anything, the more calloused towards the word of God we become (Isa6:9,10). Through his messages Jesus is looking for even one person who really has “ears to hear” what he is saying. As it said at the beginning of Revelation: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near” (1:3).

Jesus starts with the Ephesian church. Look at verse 1b. “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.” As we learned in 1:20, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven golden lampstands are the seven churches. Jesus holding the seven stars in his right hand means that he is the one who has authority and control over those churches. And Jesus walking among the lampstands means he is the one who is concerned about each one of them. He is concerned about them not just because he wants to use them, but because he loves them (1:5). We learn here that though our ministry here may seem insignificant, Jesus is deeply concerned about us.

Look at verses 2-3. “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people…You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.” The Ephesian church was good in so many ways: hard work, perseverance, endurance, discernment. We all wish we could be like that. But then Jesus goes on. Look at verse 4. “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.” Ouch! What a stinging rebuke! Jesus calls them to repent of forsaking their first love. What is it, their “first love?” It is like the love between a bride and bridegroom when they first begin their relationship. They are constantly thinking of each other. They are so excited to see each other and want nothing more than to be together. They are constantly longing for each other. They are willing to do anything for each other. In the famous story of Romeo and Juliet, they are ready to overcome all the prejudices, all the obstacles, and even willing to die for each other. Their love for each other is burning in their hearts. People experiencing the first love like this strangely find themselves singing for no obvious reason. Our first love for Jesus is like that. We experience this first love for Jesus when we first receive his grace. When we realize that Jesus gave his life as an atoning sacrifice, to save us from our sins, our hearts are melted by God’s love. We fall in love with Jesus. We are willing to do anything for him. We are willing to give our whole lives to him, holding nothing back. But over time, our love for Jesus can grow cold. We can become habitual and duty-bound, like a dutiful but loveless old couple. We can even be like the Ephesians, working hard and persevering, but all without love. In fact, when we don’t love Jesus, in our heart of hearts we start loving something or someone else, usually a mixture of many people and things other than Jesus. We can work hard and be willing to endure hardships, but spiritually we can have an adulterous heart. So Jesus rebukes us to repent.

How can we renew our first love for Jesus? Look at verse 5. “Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.” It means to remember that time when we were first passionately in love with Jesus. Basically, it means to remind ourselves of God’s great love in Jesus. It is what we should be doing in our devotional life each day. We should start out our prayers by doing our best to remember how great Jesus’ love for me is. It is the best investment of time we can make. The more we remember his love, the more we can live in love with him. Then our love is renewed every day. In Jesus Christ we are being renewed every day. 2 Corinthians 4:16 says, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.” With renewed heart, we can love Jesus newly. One pastor mentioned that he is married a new woman every day. Then someone was shocked and said, “Are you having an affair?” The pastor answered, “No, my wife is a new person every day and I fall in love with her every day.” That should be our attitude toward Jesus.

Look at verse 7b. “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.” In every message to the seven churches, Jesus says, “To the one who is victorious.” To be victorious means to win. Win what? The lottery? Win against your spouse? Win NBA championship? No. Jesus wants us to win in our spiritual struggle. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil (Eph 6). Our struggle has two battlefronts: on the outside, and then maybe more importantly, on the inside. We need to fight against temptations from outside and against our sinful nature inside. We need to fight against our pride, our ingratitude, our laziness, our complacency, our unbelief, every day. We may have ups and downs in our life-long spiritual battle, but in the end, we need to stand victorious.

How can we be victorious? We need to listen to the words of Jesus. If we keep listening to Jesus, we are victorious; if we stop listening to Jesus, we will lose. His words reveal the truth to us, inspire and strengthen us. His words empower us to fight. Ultimately, we have no way to be victorious in ourselves. If we depend on ourselves like Peter did before Jesus’ arrest, we find that we surely fail. But Jesus has already triumphed over all evil. We win the victory when we depend on him. He promises the Ephesians that if they are victorious, they’ll be able to eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God. The tree of life was at the beginning of the Bible in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. It reappears in the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22. Because of sin we were forbidden to eat from this tree. But by the grace of Jesus, we will someday get to eat of this tree freely in God’s kingdom and live forever.

Next Jesus briefly addresses the church in Smyrna (8–11). It is only four verses, but it is very powerful. Smyrna was about 35 miles north of Ephesus. It was a city known for its loyalty to Rome; it even invented the goddess Roma. It also had a large Jewish community. So Christians in Smyrna faced pressure on two fronts: to participate in emperor worship, or, to join the Jewish synagogue. If they refused both, they could have all their property confiscated, lose their jobs, or worse, lose their life. It seems the Christians in Smyrna were suffering a lot. But when he addresses this church, Jesus doesn’t point out any problem they were having; he only admires and encourages them. It suggests that when we live in ease and abundant blessings, it’s so easy to lose love for Jesus and fall into problems. But when we are really suffering, it is when we are spiritually at our best.

How does Jesus introduce himself to the church at Smyrna? Look at verse 8. “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.” Why does he say this to them? It is because they are suffering persecution under the threat of death. He wants them to know that death is not the end; rather, Jesus is the First and the Last, and he died and came to life again. It means that in Jesus they have nothing to fear. Then he speaks words of comfort and great encouragement. Look at verse 9. “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.” Jesus knew they were suffering afflictions, poverty and slander. That’s a lot all at once! Afflictions may have been physical sickness or injuries. Poverty may have come due to their faith. And they were being slandered by Jews as traitors of Rome, and through that slander they are being persecuted. Jesus warns them not to retreat to the Jewish synagogue for safety from persecution, by calling it a “synagogue of Satan.” He uses such strong language because they gathered there to oppose the gospel. Jesus also tells these suffering people “yet you are rich!” We’ll see that the seventh church, Laodicea, is rebuked for being materially rich but spiritually poor. Usually, it’s the suffering, poor people who are spiritually rich. Apostle Paul described such suffering Christians as “…sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2Co6:10). What a life!

In verse 10a, Jesus tells the Christians in Smyrna that they are about to suffer persecution and imprisonment. It comes from Satan, who is trying to test their faith and make them give up. What does Jesus tell them? Look at verse 10b. “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.” He means they are to stay faithful to him, even if they get killed for their faith. The are never to renounce it, but confess their faith in Jesus even if they are about to be executed. In history so many men and women held onto these precious words of Jesus, “Be faithful, even to the point of death.” It is so humbling to think about how all those Christian martyrs died. Revelation emphasizes God’s reward for those who were slain for their faith in Jesus (6:9-11; 12:11; 17:6; 20:4). Polycarp, the most famous of the early martyrs, was a bishop of Smyrna. He was pierced with a spear for refusing to burn incense to the Roman Emperor. He said, “86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong, how then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?”

What does Jesus mean to be faithful? He didn’t mean to just keep doing the same thing every day. He didn't even mean to keep going to church meetings, or keep studying the Bible, or keep praying, although being faithful in these things is important. Faithfulness starts with God. It is his core character to be faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to him. So to be faithful means to grow in the faithfulness of God to sinners. In light of verse 4, when Jesus says to be faithful, most of all he means to be faithful in loving him. None of us are facing the threat of death for our faith. But we face many temptations and tests of Satan every day. He tempts us with all kinds of discouragement. He tempts us with love of the world. He tempts us to live selfishly. He tempts us to give up our mission. We need to resist these temptations by loving Jesus faithfully, by loving our neighbors, by being a blessing to others. We need to be faithful to Jesus not just for a while, not even for a long while, but “even to the point of death.” What does he promise those who are so faithful? He says, “…and I will give you life as your victor’s crown.” Smyrna was famous for its athletic competitions, where many people received a wreath when they won. But believers are promised not a dead bunch of twigs, but life as their crown. We receive this crown when we persevere in loving Jesus to the very end (Jas1:12).

Today Jesus rebukes us for forsaking our first love for him, and he admonishes us, “Be faithful, even to the point of death.” May God help us to accept these words of our Lord Jesus personally. May God renew in our hearts our first love for Jesus. May God inspire us to be faithful in loving Jesus above all else, to the very end of our lives. Through loving Jesus faithfully, may we truly love one another and be a real spiritual lamp in dark times.