

The Richest Church in the World

Revelation 2:8–11

Studies in Revelation #7

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There is a satirical video online called “Martyrs Read Joel Osteen Tweets” that perfectly contrasts the so-church in our age with the historic Christian church. With an image of John the Baptist’s severed head, the lips move and say, “Don’t speak defeat instead declare, ‘I’m blessed, I’m strong, I’m healthy, this will be a great year.’” If you ask professing Christians today what God wants for them, most often than naught they’ll tell you that God wants them to be happy, and when you ask what happiness is they’ll define it in terms of health and wealth. Sadly, the church in our time measures what it means to be rich in Christ by the measurements of the world; the church’s historic measurement, though, is found in suffering and glory of Jesus Christ, who patterns for us suffering in the age and glory in the age to come.

We see this contrast between the world and the world to come in Revelation 2:8–11 and Jesus’ second prophetic message to the church in Smyrna. Jesus speaks here in a series of paradoxes. Jesus is the one **who died** but who also **came to life** (v. 9). Jesus speaks of the poverty of the church in Smyrna in terms of their **poverty** while he goes on to say **but you are rich** (v. 9). Jesus speaks of those who persecuted the church as **those who say that they are Jews...but are a synagogue of Satan** (v. 9). And he offers the paradoxical comfort that those who

are **faithful unto death** will be granted **the crown of life** (v. 10) and **will not be hurt by the second death** (v. 11).

Here in this second message Jesus writes to *The Richest Church in the World*, and through them, Jesus says the same to us today. And notice that the pattern of these message I mentioned last week in Jesus' self-identification, commendation, warning, and promise is changed here as there is no warning. This was a church that was so blessed despite being so poor in the things of this world. What a lesson for us to learn; what a criticism to the church in our time. I want you to see, then, three things here following the outline of the letter:

1. ***Christ's Identification (v. 8)***
2. ***Christ's Commendation (vv. 9–10)***
3. ***Christ's Promise (v. 11)***

Christ's Identification (v. 8)

First, as with the church in Ephesus we read *Christ's identification*. What he says is so intimately tied to the situation of this church. Notice he addresses himself here **to the angel of the church in Smyrna**. **Smyrna** is the Greek word for the embalming spice myrrh. And because myrrh was used at death, it is associated with mourning and sadness. And the Christians in this city needed Jesus' encouragement in its earthly sadness, and so he identifies himself as **the first and the last, who died and came to life** (v. 8).

When he identifies himself as **the first and the last** Jesus is encouraging the Smyrnaens with the truth that he is the eternal and sovereign ruler of human

history and that he would be with his people in the present just as he was with them in the past and would be with them in the future. Recall that this came up already in 1:17 and that I pointed our hearts and minds back to Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12 and even further back to Exodus 3 where the Lord encouraged Israel in various points in its life of suffering with this very identification. Jesus is saying to his church, “You’re going through fire now, but I am right here holding your hand.”

And when he identifies himself as he **who died and came to life** Jesus is encouraging this suffering church that he too experienced everything they were experiencing even to the point of his death, but also that afterwards he was resurrected and receive into glory. What are you suffering with this morning? What is tempting you? Jesus experienced that too, then died to defeat it, and rose again to lead your life towards heaven.

Christ’s Commendation (vv. 9–10)

After identifying himself to the church in Smyrna Jesus goes on to commend them. Notice that *Christ’s commendation* is in their context of experiencing poverty and persecution, their barrenness of sustenance yet their fullness of suffering: “**I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan**” (v. 9). When was the last time you saw a best-selling Christian living book by all the usual evangelical suspects on poverty and

persecution? Sadly today, the church is so worldly that it measures success as the world does in terms of wealth and influence. But outward “success,” so-called, is no mark of whether a church is truly successful in the estimation of the Lord. There are three marks of a true church and not one of them has anything to do with fame and fortune. And so the church in Smyrna was despised by the world but esteemed by the Lord.

Jesus commends this church in its poverty. Upward mobility in Roman culture meant taking part in its cult, that is, its worship of Emperor and Empire. And because they wouldn't, they chose to be poor, they chose to be cut out of business dealing, and they chose not to partake in blood-stained money of the Empire. They knew what Paul said to the Corinthians was true of them: not many wise, not many powerful, not many of noble birth, but God chose the foolish, the weak, and the despised (1 Cor. 1:26–28). They knew what James said was true of them: “has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom?” (Jas. 2:5) In contrast to this poverty Jesus **but you are rich!** Paul said of his apostolic ministry that he was to be regarded “as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:10). “But what about me, today, pastor?” “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Do you know how rich you are today? But this is not a worldly riches. As Paul says elsewhere, “I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered

the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8). And what does it mean to lose everything and gain Christ? “Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9). Do you know the paradox of losing yourself and the world, but gaining Christ and heaven?

Jesus also commends this church in its persecution. What you may not know is that the ancient city of Smyrna is now known as Izmir in Turkey. A former classmate of mine in seminary now pastors in this great city. Back in 2007 Christians he knew were doing Bible studies with several young Muslim men. Those Muslim men were planning their murder. On Resurrection Sunday as the Bible study began the Muslim men attacked, bound, and tortured three Christians for three hours until finally slitting their throats. Several years before the Turkish government declared that evangelical Christians were a threat to the State on equal par with Al Qaeda.

Back in the first century Christian persecution started with the **slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan** (v. 9). There was animosity from the synagogues of the Jews against those they saw as a threat to their survival, since the Romans considered Christians a sect of the Jews. Jesus says here that **say that there are Jews**, which they were ethnically, yet **are not** because spiritually they rejected Jesus as their Messiah. As Paul says in Romans 2, “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly...but a Jew is one

inwardly” (Rom. 2:28, 29). Instead, those who rejected Jesus were a **synagogue of Satan**, echoing Jesus’ words in John 8, where after the Pharisees said Abraham was their father Jesus said, no, in fact you are the “offspring of Satan” (John 8:33, 44). In fact, even Jews at Qumran who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls called the rest of the Jews “the congregation of Beliar.”¹

Jesus not only commends but he encourages and consoles: “**Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life**” (v. 10). There are three simple principles of suffering that Jesus teaches us here. First, suffering is a test: “**that you may be tested.**” What does it test? Our faith, as 1 Peter 1 and James 1 teach. Second, suffering lasts only for a period of time: “**for ten days you will have tribulation.**” Now, in the Old Testament can you remember who also was tested for ten days? John is drawing encouragement for these Christians from the example of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who also suffered for ten days in Daniel 1. Third, suffering results in glory: “**I will give you the crown of life.**” The *stephanos* or victors crown was a wreath that was placed on one’s head after a victory. As Paul says, “I have finished the race...henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness” (2 Tim 4:7, 8). Our race course

¹ See DeSilva, *Unholy Allegiances*, 87. Of note is that prior to the destruction of the temple in 70AD Jews were exempt from sacrificing to the Emperor because they offered sacrifices in the temple on behalf of the Emperor, but afterwards, the temple tax was collected by the Romans for the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome (Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, 7.6.6). Asia Minor’s first temple to *Roma Aeterna* built here in 195BC.

is a life of suffering and trial: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life” (Jas. 1:12).

Christ’s Promise (v. 11)

And this leads us to *Christ’s promise*: “**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death**” (v. 11). Notice the irony here. Being conquered in death is actually a victory; being defeated in this life for Christ is winning; our death leads to further life!

In particular, Jesus promises the believer who is faithful in this life to the end, even unto death, that he or she **will not be hurt by the second death**. The first death is obvious: leaving this life for the life to come. But what is the **second death**? Later in 20:6 we read of the second death having no power over us. Then in 20:14 we are told more clearly what it is. The time will come when Death and Hades will be “thrown into the lake of fire.” And finally, in 21:8 we read that all those outside of the New Jerusalem will experience “the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.” So what is it? Eternal condemnation. What’s Christ’s promise to us today that we can take with us to the grave? That although we will all die physically, which is the first death, if we place our lives in the hands of Jesus Christ we will not experience death eternally in the lake of fire.

You are the richest church in the world! Amen.