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Series: *Body-Building Lessons from the Seven Churches*

Title: *Smyrna*

Text: Revelation 2:8 - 11

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What is it that makes a church RICH? Have you ever thought about that?

If the word “*rich*” gives you too much of a negative impression—try these words instead: What makes a church “*healthy*” or “*productive?*” I mean, what “*asset*” is it that contributes MOST to making a church FRUITFUL in that it consistently churns our believers who are serious about their walk with God?

Here’s a few possible answers:

- Could it be that a large and talented STAFF makes a church a “*rich*” church?
- How about a full calendar?
- Is a church that has a long list of ministries constantly going on—is that necessarily a “*RICH*” church?
- Is an attractive PHYSICAL PLANT a good measuring stick to use? Are churches “*rich*” if they have all the necessary buildings and plenty of parking?
- Or to get a little more literal—does a BIG BANK ACCOUNT make a church rich?

If a church’s members give financially so that money is always in abundance—does that make it a rich church—an admirable church—a productive church?

Well, I think you know where I’m going—because the truth is none of these things—in and of themselves—not staff---not a physical plant---not a plethora of missions and ministries—not even money itself—none of this guarantees that a church will be a “*rich*” church—a “*productive*” church.

If you missed worshipping with us last week then you may not know that we have just started a sermon series on the letters to the seven churches of Revelation. The goal is to learn from these churches---learn things that will help us build up the body of Christ here at Redland. The church that is the recipient of this week’s letter is proof positive that it is possible for a congregation to have nothing that I listed a moment ago and still be truly WEALTHY spiritually. Take your Bibles and turn to the book of Revelation, chapter 2. The letter I’m referring to is in verses 8-11. It’s written to the church in Smyrna—a church founded by Paul during his first missionary journey somewhere between 53AD and 56AD—and I want you to note TWO things: First this is the SHORTEST of the seven letters---and second—it’s one of only two letters in which Jesus gives NO NEGATIVE CRITICISM—only commendations. Our Lord saw fit to write only GOOD things about the church at Smyrna.

Follow along with me now as I read this letter. If able, please stand in respect for God’s Word.

Revelation 2:8-11

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.

9 - I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan.

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.

11 - 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.”

Now, before we get into the content of this letter let me tell you about the city where the church in Smyrna ministered. It was located about 40 miles north of Ephesus and, as you can see in this slide, would have been the next stop a first

century “postman” would make in his rounds to deliver these seven letters. Back then it was said that of all the cities in Asia, this particular stop on the postal route—Smyrna—was the loveliest. In fact, people often referred to the city of Smyrna as the “*FLOWER of Asia*.” Others called it “*the CROWN of Asia*” —because in its center was a high hill and around the summit of the hill was a ring of beautiful temples dedicated to the false gods of the day. And this ring of temples that made the hill look kind of like a huge head with a crown on top. Remember this because I’ll allude to it later.

Smyrna also had a stadium in which famous games were held each year. It had a magnificent library and one of the largest theaters in Asia Minor. Plus—it claimed to be the birthplace of Homer. Smyrna had a great harbor. In fact, it was a very safe place for merchants to take their ships because it could be completely shut off by a huge chain that could be pulled across its mouth. This kept enemy ships OUT.

Now as I said, it was a beautiful city and one of the things that made it so is the fact that after being destroyed TWICE Smyrna was rebuilt—first by Alexander the Great himself. But when Smyrna was rebuilt the second time—well, they did so in style. I mean, the Smyrna of the 1st century wasn’t haphazardly thrown together like other cities. No---it was a PLANNED city with large wide streets—streets that were made of stones laid in beautiful patterns---and the fact that this city had been destroyed and then rebuilt in such grand style—well, it led people to call it “*the city of life*” —because it had come back from the dead so to speak. That’s another fact I want you to remember because I’ll come back to it later as well.

Now, one of the most important things you need to know about Smyrna in order to fully understand this letter---is the fact that it was a city that was VERY loyal to Rome. And this was widely known. In fact, Cicero once said, “*Smyrna is one of our most faithful and most ancient allies.*” And they were—I mean the Smyrna-ites or Smyrnaians---were VERY proud to be a part of the Roman empire. Patriotism ran high in those broad cobble-stoned streets! To give you an idea how patriotic they were—in the war against Mithradates in 88 B.C. things had gone badly with Rome---so badly that the soldiers of Rome were suffering from hunger and cold. Well, when the people of Smyrna heard this, they sent food---but these citizens did more than that. They also stripped off their own clothes to send them to the Roman soldiers. Their reverence for Rome was so strong that in 195B.C. Smyrna was the first city in the world to erect a temple to the “*goddess Roma*” a temple for the worship of the spirit of Rome. It would be like Derwood building a temple to worship Uncle Sam right where MacDonaldis sits! And then in A. D. 26, when all the cities of Asia Minor were COMPETING for the privilege of erecting a temple to the godhead of the emperor Tiberius, Smyrna won! It was selected for that honor, overcoming even her closest city and greatest rival, Ephesus.

At the end of the first century Smyrna had about 250,000 residents—and a large portion of them were Jews—Jews who were eager to do two things. First—they wanted to please Rome because you see, Rome had exempted them from Caesar worship. The only thing these Jews were more eager to do—was give Christians—a hard time. Now, in the beginning, emperor worship was nothing more than a spontaneous demonstration of gratitude to Rome---but toward the end of the first century that changed when Caesar worship became compulsory. It became LAW to worship the emperor—and if any city was to take this kind of law seriously it would be a city like Smyrna that had such a love affair with the Roman Empire.

Here’s how it worked. Once a year—every person had to burn a pinch of incense and say three words, “*Caesar is lord*” out loud. When they did this they received a certificate—a certificate that was required to get a job and make a living. Okay, with that background in mind, let’s look at the letter itself. I want to hang our study on the answers to three questions.

1.) **First, what was life like for the ADDRESSEES—the Christians the letter is written to?**

Verse 9 tells us THREE THINGS.

a. **First, it says they were undergoing severe AFFLICTION.**

Now the word that we translate, “*affliction*” is the Greek word, “*thlipsis*” and it is a forceful word that means “*pressure*”—literal or figurative PRESSURE. And don’t think this is a reference to the ordinary pressures we all feel

in day-to-day life. No—the pressure spoken of here is INTENSE pressure—the kind that would be used to execute a man by making him lie down on the ground—and then placing a great rock on him such that the weight of that rock gradually crushes the life out of him. That’s the kind of PRESSURE or AFFLICTION the Christians in Smyrna were enduring—the kind of pressure that makes you feel like you’re having the life crushed out of you.

I’ve told you before that my dad was raised on a farm in Mississippi and he told me once that when he was a boy on the farm, they had a molasses mill. He said that molasses is made out of cane juice—but first you have to get the juice out of the cane. To do that, they would feed the stalks of cane through a grinder powered by a mule that would walk around the mill. My grandad had two mules—MOBE and TOBE. Well, the grinder itself consisted of three or four heavy metal wheels about 12 inches in diameter. These heavy wheels turned side by side and dad and his brothers would feed those stalks of cane between the metal wheels—and the juice would be crushed or squeezed out.

Well, that is an illustration of what was happening to the members of this church. They were having the life pressed out of them for one reason—because of their loyalty to Christ. Herschel Hobbs says they were pressed between a rock and a hard place—by the Jews—and the pagans.

In other words, the members of this church were catching it from every side. The pagans were giving them a hard time for their refusal to worship the emperor—and the Jews were giving them a hard time because they worshiped Jesus as the Messiah—the Son of God.

It’s interesting to note that the word “Smyrna” means “myrrh” which was a fragrant spice—but to get the fragrance out—first this spice had to be crushed. This illustrates the fact that the fragrance—or the “richness” of Smyrna’s powerful testimony—came out of the crushing pressure of its suffering.

b. So—they were going through severe affliction—but as it says in verse 9, they were also enduring extreme POVERTY.

Now, there are two Greek words for poverty. One is the word for a man who has to work for a living. He has to work to eat and his income is so low that he barely makes it. He has nothing extra. He just gets by. He buys day old bread and is dependent on charity for his clothing.

But that is not the Greek word for poverty that is used here. No—this second word for poverty literally means BEGGARY. It means absolute and utter destitution. So, the people in this church were poor—but they weren’t getting by. They were starving. Many of them were homeless—some because they had been deprived of the right to work and make a living. None of the trade guilds would hire them—because they refused to worship Caesar and insisted on following Jesus—which kept them from getting the required certificate.

So—understand, these believers were DIRT poor—yet Jesus said to them, *“You are RICH.”*

You have a powerful testimony! Your church is producing amazingly mature believers! This tells us the best indicator or a church’s health—is the degree to which its members faithfully rely on Jesus for literally everything. And—usually the only time we do that is if we have no-THING else to rely on. As someone has put it, *“We don’t get it through our heads that Jesus is all we need until Jesus is all we have.”* And this is a hard principle for many Christians to grasp. Vance Havener writes,

“It is not easy to preach on Smyrna now-a-days. The average American congregation is in no mood to appreciate such a church. It is not easy to interest a well-fed, well-clothed—well-housed Sunday morning crowd in the ‘Smyrna brand’ of loyalty. We are not interested in what it costs to be a Christian, but in what we GET by being one. In a day of ‘Health, Wealth, and Happiness in Ten Easy Lessons or Money Refunded,’ for many, Christianity has become simply a better way to get rich or have a big time. We would make a bellboy out of the Lord and a Santa Claus out of the Almighty.”

Unfortunately, Havener is right. These days many believers have a warped sense of wealth. They focus on the temporary treasures of this world instead of the eternal treasures of Heaven.

As J. Ralph Grant puts it, *“The churches of the first century were marked by material poverty and spiritual power, while many of the churches of our day are marked by material wealth and spiritual weakness.”*

Well, what about you? How do you define true WEALTH? How “RICH” are you as a disciple of Jesus? How precious is Jesus and His kingdom to you? Do you find your own values reflected in this poem?

*“I counted dollars while God counted crosses.
I counted gain while He counted losses.*

*I counted my worth by the things gained in store,
but He sized me up by the scars that I bore.*

*I coveted honors and sought for degrees.
He wept as He counted the hours on my knees.*

*I never knew till one day by a grave,
how vain are the things that we spend life to save.*

*I did not yet know, ‘til a Friend from above, said,
rich is he who is rich in God’s love.”*

So, the believers were enduring AFFLICTION and POVERTY—but that’s not all.

c. They were also facing SLANDER and RIDICULE.

And 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.

Here are some examples of the slanderous gossip they spread:

- 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 said 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.”*

But the Jews weren’t the only ones slandering these Christians. Loyal Roman citizens—the people of Smyrna who worshipped Rome and its emperors—they did this as well.

- For example, they accused the Christians of ATHEISM because they denied the existence of the “gods” of Rome.
- They also spread the rumor that Christians were ARSONISTS because they taught that the world would one day end in flames.
- They even accused the believers of being REVOLUTIONARIES because they would not obey the law and say, ***“Caesar is Lord.”***

Joe Stowell says that years ago when he was the president of Moody, there was a summer in which Baptists had a plan to send thousands of young people to Chicago for the summer. It was to be mission trip that lasted three months. These kids were going to give up their summer break in order to feed the homeless. They were going to help rebuild some neighborhoods. They were going to share the liberating news that Jesus died so that we might live. But---when word got out that these kids were coming---an article appeared on the front page of *The Chicago Tribune*---an article that told about opposition that was building against these kids---opposition from the Council of Churches—a council that reminds me of the Jews of Smyrna.

The members of this council wrote a letter saying, *“We don’t want your young people in Chicago. We don’t need your young people. What these young people will promote stimulates hate crimes.”*

Unfortunately, there are lots of other examples of this because Christians are slandered—even today—but we don’t have it as hard as those 1st century believers did—not yet. You see, to follow Jesus Christ in that town was to literally take your life in your hands. In Smyrna the church was a place for HEROES of the faith. And one of its most famous heroes was the Bishop of Smyrna. His name was Polycarp. He was martyred for his faith on Saturday, February 23, 155AD. This would have been during the public games that were held in Smyrna, so the city was crowded and the crowds were excited. I’m not sure what “spark” set things off—but tradition says that in the midst of one of those crowds, suddenly the shout went up,
“Away with the atheists; let Polycarp be searched for!”

Polycarp had fled from the city because he was aware of the mood of the town in which he served our Lord. But he was tracked to his hiding place. Some say he was betrayed by another believer who was tortured for the information. But Polycarp made no attempt to flee. Instead, he offered food and drink to his captors and asked permission to pray. Then as they traveled to the city, the officer in charge urged Polycarp to recant. He said, *“What harm can it do to sacrifice to the emperor? It’s just a pinch of incense and three words.”* But Polycarp refused and they took him into custody. When they arrived in Smyrna he was brought before the proconsul in the amphitheater who said, *“Polycarp, repent your years. Swear by the genius of Caesar. Swear and I will release you. Revile Christ and you will go free.”* Polycarp replied, *“For 86 years I have served Him and He has done me no wrong; how can I then blaspheme my King Who saved me?”*

The proconsul condemned Polycarp to be burned at the stake—and when he issued this sentence, it is said that the Jews forgot their Sabbath anti-work laws and eagerly ran to get wood for the fire. As Polycarp stood tied to the stake he prayed, *“O Lord, Almighty God, the Father of Your beloved Son Jesus Christ, through Whom we have come to know you—I thank You for counting me worthy this day and hour of sharing the cup of Christ among the number of Your martyrs.”* The fire had been lit but the wind drove the flames away from him, and prolonged his misery, so a soldier put an end to Polycarp’s suffering with his sword.

Polycarp was just one of the more famous Christian martyrs of Smyrna but persecution wasn’t limited to this city. During the 2nd and 3rd centuries, the Christian Church was the subject of TEN imperial persecutions that lasted a total of 250 years. It has been estimated that there were approximately five million Christians martyred from 64AD until 313AD—when Constantine issued his edict legalizing Christianity.

And the persecution of Christians continues to this day. In fact, in countries around the world believers are persecuted more now than ever before. Right now—today—309 million Christians live in nations with very high or extreme levels of persecution, up from 260 million in last year’s list. This year the top 10 worst persecuting nations are relatively unchanged. After North Korea is Afghanistan, followed by Somalia, Libya, Pakistan, Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, Nigeria, and India. China—who hosted the winter Olympics—joined the top 20 for the first time in a decade.

Let me put it a different way. Every DAY, 13 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith. And every DAY, another 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, and another five are abducted.

You know, all the Smyrna believers had to do was burn a little incense once a year and say, *“Caesar is Lord.”* From then on they could worship as they pleased—but for them it was wrong to cross that line. Well—I wonder—where is your line? How far are you willing to compromise before saying—NO...I’m not going to do that. I’m not going to live that way because Jesus is LORD of my life?

2.) **Okay—we’ve looked at the ADDRESSEES—the recipients of this letter. What do we know about the AUTHOR?**

This is an important question for us to answer as we study this letter—because it makes a great deal of difference WHO says—or WRITES—something.

I read once of an aging woman who went to church for the first time. She was uneducated and Biblically illiterate—plus her life had been full of hardship and discouragement. In the course of his sermon the pastor quoted Matthew 11:28 where Jesus says, **“Come unto Me all that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”** Well, these precious words brought the thrill of hope to this woman’s tired heart but she was cautious. So, she nudged her friend and said, **“Those are good words—but who is it that says them?”**

This was a good question for her to ask—because these words only mean something if the Person Who said them can do what He says He can do. They only matter if the One Who said them can indeed give rest to the heavy laden—and of course He can! Well—the Person Who wrote those comforting words is the same Person who wrote THESE words to the church in Smyrna. The Author is Jesus Himself—Jesus Who walks in the midst of the seven lampstands—Jesus Who loves the Christians who made up the church in Smyrna---and in the first sentence of His letter, Jesus says two VERY important things about Himself.

a. First, He says these words are the words of Him Who is THE FIRST AND THE LAST.

In other words, Jesus says, *“Fear not—because I was here before there was anything to fear and I will be here after the things you fear have passed away. Through all the trials you have or ever will have remember this: I was present with you at the beginning of it and I will be present at the end of it and I shall be here all the way through. I am the FIRST and the LAST.”*

Jesus is saying, *“I’m not going anywhere. I have been and always will be WITH YOU—in your midst.”* I’m reminded of our Lord’s words in Isaiah 41 where He says, **“Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will hold you with My victorious right hand.”**

b. And then, Jesus says a second very important thing about Himself. He says, “I KNOW what you are going through...I KNOW...I am aware of your afflictions.”

And please understand. Jesus is not JUST aware. He doesn’t just KNOW intellectually. He knows experientially—empathetically. Jesus KNEW—HE UNDERSTOOD—what the Smyrna believers are going through...because He went through the same things Himself.

- For example, Jesus knows what it’s like to live in extreme poverty. Remember—He was homeless—He didn’t even have a place to lay His head.
- Jesus was also slandered and ridiculed. He was goaded and mocked---and tortured—even to the point of death.

So, He says, *“I know about your pressure—My blood was pressed out of Me as I hung on the cross.”* Jesus had experienced everything those Smyrna believers had. And—doesn’t that bring YOU comfort as you face the trials and tribulations of life? Knowing that someone who loves us KNOWS what we are going through is a source of great comfort—because we long to unburden ourselves to someone who understands.

I know that when I was diagnosed with that form of cancer that hits so many men later in life---it was unbelievably comforting to have men come up to me who had gotten the same diagnosis say, *“Mark---I’ve been there---I KNOW what you’re feeling right now and I’m praying for you. If you have any questions---if you need to talk---I’m here.”* We all need friends like that—experienced confidants we can go to---and of course, Jesus is the world’s greatest confidant. No friend can bring to us the peace and the relief that He can bring. As the spiritual puts it, *“Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows but Jesus.”* And—not only does Jesus KNOW—He has CONQUERED the things that threaten to conquer us. Jesus triumphed over pain---over fear---He even triumphed over death itself. That’s WHO is willing and able to help us to overcome as well.

3.) So—we’ve looked at the ADDRESSEES and the AUTHOR...let’s finish our study by answering this question: What is Jesus’ main ADMONITION?

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

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

Look at 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.”***

Now, does that admonition sound a bit strange? I mean, don't you expect Jesus to say, *“Fear not---hang in there---for I will alleviate your suffering.”* Or---*“Fear not—for your suffering will soon be over. I'm going to put a stop to this.”* Or---*“Fear not—for I will destroy those who are persecuting you!”* But Jesus says none of those things. Instead, He said, ***“It's going to get worse. In fact, the devil is going to throw some of you into prison.”***

And going to prison back then—meant torture and depravation and death. Jesus doesn't explain WHY—just that its bad and it's going to get worse.

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

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

Now, how could they obey Jesus' admonitions? How could they FEAR NOT—and BE FAITHFUL—even through suffering and persecution—even to the point of death? Well—to refer back to an earlier point—it is because of WHO said those words. They could PERSEVERE through suffering and imprisonment and even death because they had put their faith in the only One Who conquered this enemy that comes for us all. 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 those two things I told you about Smyrna earlier? Remember—it was called the *“Crown of Asia?”*—well, Jesus KNEW about that claim. He walked in their midst and knew all about the city in which they lived so He said, ***“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.”***

Do you remember the other thing I told you earlier? 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 to rebuild—that's nothing! Anyone can do that. I can bring a PERSON back to life forever! And I'll do that for you!”***

Well, these Smyrna believers heeded Jesus' admonitions. They held on to their faith no matter what came because they knew that an eternity in Heaven waited them. They knew that, to quote Mother Teresa, *“When we get to Heaven the worst suffering we will have endured on earth will seem like nothing worse than one night in a bad motel.”*

We can endure because our persecution is temporary but our eternal reward is permanent. As 2nd Corinthians 4:17 says, ***“Our LIGHT AND MOMENTARY troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”*** 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.”***

We are often HARD-PRESSED in our day and age. When it comes to earthly joys many are poor. But—we are 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—Sovereign over everything we face.

LET US PRAY