

### **Smyrna: “Be Faithful Even to the Point of Death”**

The title of my message this morning is “Be Faithful Even unto Death,” taking my cue from verse 10 of the text where the risen Christ tells the church in Smyrna to “Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

The church in Smyrna, like all of the churches in Asia Minor at the time Revelation was written, was under intense persecution. They were getting it from two fronts.

#### **Pressure from Rome**

First, pressure was coming from the Roman Empire. The book of Revelation was written around 90 AD and it was at this time that Domitian, Emperor of Rome, began to demand Caesar worship. This was done to unify the vast Empire. The local religions of the people they ruled over were incapable of uniting the empire because not everyone believed in each different people groups religion so Rome got the idea that worshipping Caesar could serve as the one unifying force of all of these different groups living within the Empire. Consequently, Caesar worship became a litmus test for ones loyalty to the Roman government.

The thing that is interesting about this historical fact is that Rome was actually a benevolent ruler to anyone who would acknowledge her as Lord. Rome gladly let the various peoples they ruled over practice their religion. They had no interest in stomping out people’s religion, so long as the people would acknowledge Caesar as Lord. For most people living under Roman rule acknowledging Caesar as Lord was not a problem because so many of them were already polytheists to begin with (belief in many different gods). What was the harm in adding one more god to the collection? But there were two groups of people under Rome’s rule that this posed a problem for. One group was the Jews and the other was the Christians.

The Jews were bound and determined to remain faithful to their belief that there is only one God, Yahweh, and only He is worthy of being worshipped. The Christians, which came out of the Jewish people and religion, were also committed to following only one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. Interestingly, the way Rome responded to these two groups was different. Rome made an exception for the Jewish people. They didn’t make her acknowledge Caesar to be Lord. But for the Christians no such exception was made.

Why?

The Jewish people who were not Christian were not an evangelical group of people. They were quite content with just practicing their religion from within and among themselves but the Christians were evangelical and they sought to spread their gospel to all the nations of the earth. The Christians took Jesus Christ into the Roman marketplace of ideas and challenged all other concepts of God and called all people everywhere to repent and follow Jesus Christ as Lord. The non-Christian Jews got a break because they posed no real threat to Rome but the Christians were a deemed a threat because if they were to be successful in their evangelism Rome would end up with an Empire full of people who were unwilling to confess Caesar as Lord and this would not

be good for their efforts in trying to unite the kingdom through Caesar worship. Consequently, Rome began to persecute the church intensely. This led to ostracization in the public square, imprisonment, and at times death by execution.

### **Pressure from the Jews**

Christians also got pressure from many of the Jews at that time. This largely had to do with the fact that most Jewish people did not embrace Jesus as Messiah. The problems they had with Christianity were three-fold.

- First, many Jews, though they believed in the coming of a Messiah, rejected Jesus because he did not liberate them from Rome. It was a common belief in Jesus' day that the Messiah would destroy all political powers that ruled over her and since Jesus didn't come to do that he was rejected by many.
- Second, Jesus claimed to be God in human flesh and the idea that the Messiah would be God Himself was an anathema to the mind of most Jews.
- Third, Jesus, who himself was a Jew, was viewed by his contemporaries as one who undermined the Mosaic Law and that was a no-no as far as the Jews were concerned.

Because of all of these kinds of things the rift between Christians and Jews who were not Christians (*which was the majority of Jews*) began to widen and the Christians began to be persecuted by the very people who had given birth to her. Now the way this worked was not by direct persecution. The Jews, because they themselves were under Roman rule, did not have the authority to persecute the Christians. Only the state could do that. Consequently, the way the Jews persecuted the Christians at the time of this letter was simply by being a nark for the empire. They would regularly report to the Roman authorities those Christians who refused to burn incense at the altar of Caesar and who were proselyting their faith throughout the city. In short, they did the reporting and Rome did the persecuting.

Knowing this about the context that the church in Smyrna found herself in helps us to understand why the risen Jesus said to them, **“I know your afflictions and 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. 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.”** (v. 9-10)

Persecution and facing the prospect of having to forfeit your life because of your faith is not something that most American Christians have given much thought to. We were born in a country that to some degree was founded upon Judeo/Christian principles. We are (*by far*) the most religious country in the west and the Christian faith is still the most predominant religion in our country. Not only that, for the most part throughout our nation's history we Christians have had the privilege of having the culture agree with our values and ethics, even if they themselves did not practice them. This means that in a way the American culture has been our friend, not our enemy, and as a consequence we have lived a relatively easy life in this country.

## **The Danger in Having the World Agree with You**

But as wonderful as that may seem, there is a great danger for us growing up in that kind of context. The danger is this: When the culture begins to change, when she begins to drift from her Judeo/Christian moorings, the church is tempted to go along with her because she does not want to lose her friendship with the world. In short, we don't want to find ourselves on the outside, ostracized by the culture that once embraced us but now considers us to be intolerant, out of date, mean spirited, and judgmental.

We have been friends with the world for so *long (since that world used to embrace our values and ethics)* that we have become addicted to her to her way of thinking and we don't want to find ourselves on the outs, so what some of the church begins to do is it begins to compromise her core teachings and values because she mistakenly thinks that if she will do that the world won't reject her; the world will think she is nice and the world will flood the doors of our churches and our houses of worship will be full if we will just bow down to Caesar and say she is Lord. If we will just compromise and won't be so dogmatic and intolerant the world won't throw eggs at us and we can get on with being the church.

The problem with this great lie is that it never works. As a church we could compromise our views on the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Bible, and our ethics on sexuality and marriage and the world would congratulate us for not being so mean, intolerant, and bigoted but they would still be where they are most every Sunday morning-in bed asleep after a night on the town. There is absolutely no historical precedent in history for the church watering down her convictions and beliefs and it being an effective tool for reaching people for Christ and making committed disciples. It doesn't work.

Right now we are in a unique place in American history because cultural Christianity, nominal Christianity (*which Christianity without discipleship, oxymoron*) is collapsing faster than a deck of cards. This is scary for churches so they begin to fret about what they will do in order to survive? What new program do we need to create? And what do we need to do in order to become more relevant and then in the midst of trying to her adjust sails to keep and reach her friends in the world you end up gutting your doctrine, compromising your faith, cheapening the gospel, turning your church into a coffee shop, your worship services into a rock concerts and sermons into five minute pep talks on how to make it through the week, and before you know it your whole enterprise has turned into a consumer driven Wal-Mart one stop shopping experience. It usually does not work and even if it did why would it matter? All you would have is a house full of people whom you were leading into damnation. Which in the end would make Judgment Day all the worse for your church.

## **It's Going to Get Worse Before It Gets Better**

This is our current situation that we are facing as a Christian church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in America in Statesville and there two things I believe about our current context.

First, I believe the persecution is going to get worse in the culture. I don't think death is in the foreseeable future but I do think the ostracization is going to get worse and I do think that it is very

possible that the government will force people to choose between either compromising their Christian faith and convictions for the sake of keeping their jobs or businesses or being shut down and fired for not doing so. I also think that religiously affiliated schools that desire to follow the historic teaching of the faith on matters of Christian sexual ethics will be forced to either compromise their positions or close their doors. It's going to get worse before its going to get better, if it ever gets better.

Second, I also think that for the short term it's going to get worse in the church that refuses to cower to the culture. Unfortunately, to a degree, we have lost a generation or two of many younger people because we have not equipped them to think critically and Biblically about many of the issues that we are facing in the West as it concerns the rise of pluralism and the massive philosophical and moral shifts that have taking place in the last 50 years in our nation.

We have made unfortunate decisions as parents and as a church (*usually unconsciously*) that all we wanted to do was raise nice children who turned out to be productive citizens with a healthy dose of religion to make them into good people, but we did not equip them to think deeply about their faith and how it applies to the massive shifts that were occurring all around them. As a consequence, the universities, the culture, and Hollywood is now eating their lunch. We've lost a generation. They are not here and we can stick our fingers in the wind all we want and adjust our theological sails to be more palatable and they, for the most part, still won't come. The only way to get any of them back and to not lose future generations will be to show them how the gospel offers a worldview and way of life that is better than what the culture, Hollywood, and the predominant thinking in the universities are offering them and then disciple them.

### **Repent and Embrace the Test**

But as bad as all that sounds it is not all doom and gloom. Long term there is always hope for anyone or any church who will repent from her love affair with the world and be faithful to her groom, Jesus.

As a church we must stay true to the Scriptures because it is in them that God has shown us the purpose for which we were created. This is God's playbook for our lives. It tells us everything we need to know about God's intent for our lives, what's wrong with us as broken and sinful creatures, and how it is that God can put us back together again in Christ. If we will give our lives to Christ and follow his Word we will live. Jesus said, **“The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy, but I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (Jn. 10:10)**

What is happening before us is a test, just as it was for the church in Smyrna when the risen Christ told them **“the devil was testing them when they were being thrown into prison.”** And tests are a great thing if we will not fail them. Tests make us strong. We don't have to be perfect in order to pass them but we sure can't compromise our faith and on what God has told us in His Word.

Truly, what is before us is pale compared to Christians who are being imprisoned and put to death for practicing their faith in Islamic countries. What we are being called to hold the line on at this point in our history is pale in comparison to what they are having to face. Surly if they can face

death without compromising their faith, then we can remain faithful in the face of being called bigoted, or even worse having to shut down our enterprises or lose our jobs because the Empire has put us in a place where we will be forced to violate our conscience which is held captive by the Word of God if we stay. Embrace the test. If you do you will inherit eternal life but if you don't you could lose it. Jesus said **“If any man wants to save his life he will lose it, but any man who loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the world yet forfeit his soul?” (Lk. 9:24)**

**“He who has ears let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches, He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” (v.11)**

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.