“BE FAITHFUL, EVEN TO THE POINT OF DEATH”

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 might find ourselves in elements of each one. Today we’ll look at the messages to the first two churches: Ephesus and Smyrna. In this study we want to think about who Jesus is, what pleases and displeases him, 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’s 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. Each one starts by addressing the angel of that church. The Greek word for “angel” can also be translated as “messenger.” The angel, in turn, is supposed to give Jesus’ message to the church. 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’s 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’re the words of the most important one, Jesus. It’s 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.” It’s the same expression Jesus used when he taught the crowds in parables. It’s still true today. 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’s 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 begins with the church at Ephesus. Why does he start with Ephesus? Ephesus was the leading city of Asia Minor. It had the best natural harbor, and so it was on the major East-West trade route and had a world-famous market. Even Cleopatra shopped there. People from all the cities of Asia Minor would travel to Ephesus to buy and sell or do other official business. Actually, Ephesus was one of the four major cities of the entire Roman Empire: Rome, Ephesus, Antioch and Alexandria. Apostle Paul spent his longest time, three years, in Ephesus. He would go to the lecture hall of Tyrannus daily to lead discussions on the Bible, and through that ministry, all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Ac19:9,10). Through Ephesus, the other six churches had actually gotten started. So the church in Ephesus was like the mother church to them all. Whether they realized it or not, the Ephesian church members had the strongest influence on all the others. No wonder Jesus begins his messages with the church in Ephesus.

How does Jesus introduce himself to them? Read verse 1b. 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 he’s the one who has authority and control over those churches. And Jesus walking among the lampstands means he’s the one who’s concerned about each one of them. He’s concerned about them not just because he wants to use them, but because he loves them (1:5). The mother church in Ephesus probably felt responsible for those churches and tried to control what was going on in them. The Ephesian church needed to hear that Jesus is the one who cares about all seven churches the most, and he’s the one who can help them the best. We learn here that though our ministry here may seem insignificant, Jesus is deeply concerned about us.

Read verses 2,3. Twice Jesus says here, “I know.” And he first says he knows “their deeds.” Five times in these seven messages he begins by telling the churches, “I know your deeds” (2:2,19; 3:1,8,15). Sometimes, it means good deeds; other times, it means deeds that are sorely lacking. It tells us that though we may be able to put on a good show for people, we can’t fool Jesus. Hebrews 4:13 says, “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

In this case Jesus mentions the good deeds of the believers in Ephesus. In verse 2 he says he knows their “hard work” and their “perseverance.” Apostle Paul taught the Ephesian church that we live by the grace of Jesus, not by our works, so that no one can boast (Eph2:8,9). Then he taught them, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph2:10). In Christ we’re created to do many good works. The New Testament strongly emphasizes that Christians should be doing many good works (e.g.Mt5:16). Apostle Paul left his assistant Timothy in Ephesus, and he told Timothy repeatedly to teach the Ephesians to do many good deeds or works (1Ti2:10; 5:10,25; 6:18). Evidently they had accepted this teaching. After we receive his grace of forgiveness, Jesus wants to see us doing many good works. But what *are* these good works Jesus wants to see in us? 1 Timothy 5:10 describes some of them: “bringing up children,” “showing hospitality,” serving the Lord’s people, “helping those in trouble,” and being “devoted to all kinds of good deeds.” 6:18 says good works are to be “generous and willing to share.” James 3:13 says these good works are done “in humility.” Our Lord Jesus himself listed some good works he wants his servants to be doing: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned (Mt25:35,36). He wants us to be doing these good works not to get paid in some way, but purely, out of genuine love for him (Mt25:40). We might try to do these good works for a while, but after giving and giving and giving, we can get burned out. So Jesus commends the Ephesians in verse 3, “You have persevered and endured hardship for my name, and you have not grown weary.” The secret to persevering in good works is to be doing them “for my name,” for Jesus, not for my own reputation; again, out of love for Jesus.

Read verse 2b again. Jesus also praises them for their spiritual discernment. In the ancient world, people who liked to teach would travel from city to city and gather people to listen to them, and afterwards, take donations. Some came and did this in Ephesus, calling themselves apostles. But the Ephesians, after having studied the Bible deeply with Apostle Paul, came to have discernment. They could test who was a true apostle and who was not. How? It was by whether or not their teaching was focused on Jesus and his saving grace, or on some other great-sounding human ideas, and also, by whether their lifestyle matched their teaching. Jesus still wants us to have such discernment.

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. Read verses 4,5. Ouch! What a stinging rebuke! Jesus calls them to repent of forsaking their first love. What is it, their "first love?" It’s like the love between a bride and bridegroom when they first begin their relationship. They’re constantly thinking of each other. They’re so excited to see each other and want nothing more than to be together. They’re constantly longing for each other. They’re willing to do anything for each other. In the famous story of Romeo and Juliet, they’re 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 a first love like this strangely find themselves singing for no obvious reason. It’s like our first love for Jesus. 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’re willing to do anything for him. We’re 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.

We can’t love Jesus with our own strength; we love because he first loved us (1Jn4:10,19). When we realize his great love for us, that he gave his life and shed his blood for our sins, the Holy Spirit produces love in us, and love for Jesus begins to grow in our hearts. Jesus taught his disciples the allegory of the vine and the branches to teach us all to remain in his love, and to bear the fruit of love by loving one another (Jn15). It tells us that our first love for Jesus doesn’t have to grow cold. In fact, when we remain in a love relationship with Jesus, the Bible says this love for Jesus grows deeper and richer. Apostle Paul actually prayed for the Ephesians like this: “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph3:16–19).

Christian life needs to have hard work and perseverance in it, but it all needs to be motivated by love (1Th1:3). Without love, all our sacrifices and sufferings amount to nothing (1Co13:1–3). Jesus is looking beyond all our outward actions, even all our hard work, perseverance and endurance; he’s looking at our hearts, at whether or not we really love him, at whether or not we still love him most.

But practically, how can we renew our first love for Jesus? Read verse 5 again. Jesus says to consider how far we have fallen. 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 for us in Jesus. It’s 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’s the best investment of time we can make. The more we remember his love, the more we can live in love with him. Apostle Paul also shows us how to keep this first love alive in our hearts. He told his spiritual son Timothy, who was working in Ephesus, about his own testimony. By that time Paul had planted so many churches throughout the Roman Empire. He was probably the most outstanding apostle. But he reminded Timothy and everyone in Ephesus that he used to be a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, but that Jesus poured out his grace, mercy and love on him. He said he was the worst of sinners (1Ti1:13–15). Like Paul we need to remember vividly what kind of sinner we used to be. It’s the best way to keep his grace and love burning in our hearts.

Look at verse 6. The Nicolaitans seem to be a group of people who claimed to be Christians, but who were abusing the grace of Jesus (2:14,15). They thought Jesus’ grace is a license to commit all kinds of sins freely. Jesus still hates the practices of those who sin freely in the name of his grace.

Read verse 7. In every message to the seven churches, Jesus says, “To the one who is victorious.” He’s talking to an entire church, but he’s appealing not to group faith, but to personal faith. To be victorious means to win. Win what? The lottery? A bet? Arm wrestling? 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 (Eph6). Our struggle has two battlefronts: without, and then maybe more importantly, within. We need to be fighting against temptations from without and against our sinful nature within. We need to fighting 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 be listening to the words of Jesus. If we keep listening to Jesus, we’re victorious; if we stop listening to Jesus, we fall flat on our faces. His words reveal the truth to us, inspire and strengthen us. His words empower us to fight. Also, we need to be depending on Jesus. 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’re 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’re forbidden to eat from this tree. But by the grace of Jesus, we'll 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’s only four verses, but it’s 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. 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’re really suffering, it may be when we’re spiritually at our best.

How does Jesus introduce himself to the church at Smyrna? Read verse 8. Why does he say this to them? It’s because they’re 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. Read verse 9. 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’re 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!

Look at verse 10a. Jesus tells the Christians in Smyrna that they're about to suffer persecution and imprisonment. It comes from Satan, who’s trying to test their faith and make them give up. What does Jesus tell them? Read verse 10b. He means they're to stay faithful to him, even if they get killed for their faith. They're never to renounce it, but confess their faith in Jesus even if they're 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's 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).

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 so important. Faithfulness starts with God. It's his core character to be faithful to us even when we're 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. We can be faithful in love for Jesus when we resist loving our own lives, and, when we depend on the blood of Jesus and on his word (12:11). 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.