

***All Things New: Be Faithful And Repent!***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***Deuteronomy 32:3-4; Luke 12:35-46; Revelation 2:8-17***

Our final Scripture reading is from Revelation 2:8-17. May God add His blessing to the riches of His holy, perfect, and infallible Word. [Jesus says,] “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. 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. 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. 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. To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live -- where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city -- where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.”

Faithfulness. What does that mean today? We know its definition – steadfastness, trustworthiness, loyalty. But those are no longer the American values they used to be. Companies aren’t loyal to their customers or their employees, and we aren’t loyal to them. We started killing off marriage back 60 years ago, and now nearly 60% of Millennials 23-38 years old have never been married...although despite their fear of marriage, they are much more likely to stay married than previous generations. They’ve determined to be loyal to a spouse – they’re just waiting a lot longer to find the person to be loyal to. In a world of so many choices where loyalty is low, does it matter if I stick with Ford or Chevy? Why not look for the bargain?

Faithfulness is key in the two letters Jesus has John write to the churches in Smyrna and Pergamum. Both churches have shown it, and Jesus compliments them for it. Yet the church in Pergamum has issues that may compromise their faithfulness – and the church in Smyrna is about to face the most severe test of their faithfulness yet. Today we’ll study Jesus’ words to them and see how the calls to faithfulness and repentance are needed in the modern church.

Jesus’ introduction to the church in Smyrna directly relates to the issues He will address with them. He is “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” This church needs these words because of the trials about to come. They need to know that death doesn’t have the final word. They need to remember that Jesus has the power to see them through. It also stands out as the first of many paradoxes Jesus will work through in this letter. He is both First and Last, both having died and risen. Only in Jesus do these things make sense. The same is true of many other ideas in the letter to Smyrna.

The next paradox is that they are rich, despite their afflictions and poverty. Those two don't go together, right? And yet they are rich in what matters. They have been faithful. Of all the churches Jesus writes to, theirs is only one of two where Jesus does not have a rebuke or warning for them about their conduct. They have been passing the test, walking with Jesus, drawing close to Him. They don't have money, but they have the peace of their Savior.

And that's a good question for us: *do we approach life from the view of worldly scarcity or heavenly riches?* The law of scarcity says there is never enough. Never enough money to buy everything we want, not enough food for everyone to be satisfied, never enough time to do everything we'd like to do. The poverty mentality, the mentality that I do not have enough, I am not getting what I want or need, leads to almost every sin. James 4 tells us that the source of conflicts come from the worldly desires that wage war inside of us.

An attitude of plenty gives us gratitude for what we have. God needs nothing from us, says Psalm 50; He can give to us, because He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. The attitude of plenty says, "I have enough because God has provided what I need." We don't just have food and clothing and shelter, we have a Savior who loves us and has guaranteed our future.

Making this change in mindset is tough, especially for those of us who grew up in poverty or on its edges. My minds regularly plays through the "what if" scenarios. I'm always a little worried that the grocery money will hold out. But that poverty mentality is dangerous to our souls. The first recorded sin occurred because Adam and Eve had the fear of missing out. They lost their satisfaction with God, fearing He was holding back on them. But Christ is telling the church of Smyrna, "You are rich in Me." Are we willing to realize that we are rich when we trust in Him and not what we've got?

Here's the next paradox: the people slandering the church say they are Jews, but according to Jesus, they aren't; they're actually following the great deceiver. We don't know exactly what slander the church is facing, but historically, we have a good idea. The Roman Empire tolerated religions of the ethnic groups that had been conquered. The Jews were allowed to honor Caesar without worshipping him as a god. But truly new religions were off-limits, especially if they undercut Caesar's supremacy. By the early 60s AD, Jewish leaders protested that Christianity was not an offshoot of Judaism but a completely different religion – meaning it was no longer protected within the empire. And Christianity only had room for one king on the throne, and that was Christ, not Caesar. For generations, Christians faced fierce persecution.

So why does Jesus use such volatile language to describe the Jewish opposition in Smyrna? He emphasizes the same thing He said in His earthly life – that true Jews, the true people of God, aren't defined by their genealogy but by their genuine love for the one true God and obedience to Him. To Jesus, we are Jews. The real children of Abraham are those who turn to Jesus in faith and repentance. Jesus told the Jews who opposed Him that they were the devil's children in John chapter 8, so this is nothing new. Jesus isn't condemning those Jews who "live and let live," but those who oppose Him don't belong to God, regardless of their heritage.

Jesus goes on to tell the church, don't be afraid of what's coming. Some of you will be put in prison for a short time; you will be persecuted; some of you will face death. Jesus doesn't promise an easy road because Satan is a real and passionate enemy, but slander and persecution and even death are not signs of unfaithfulness. In fact, they are signs that they are staying true to Jesus. Don't be afraid, Jesus says, because the crown of life is coming. It's another paradox – the crown of *life* will be given to those about to *die*. In fact, he who overcomes cannot be hurt at all by the second death. Die for Jesus and the second death means nothing.

So for today, we should ask: *Are we faithful? And what fears are keeping us from faithfulness?* These folks in Smyrna were ordinary folks like you and me; they'd been faithful in the midst of poverty. But now they're going to have to bring their A-game to adversity and persecution like they've not yet seen. Some of them will face death. Jesus' promises to them are based in their remaining faithful. This is an encouragement and a challenge to them.

We don't face death for our faith, nowhere even close. We don't fear that. But we fear being ostracized. Being hurt emotionally. Being rejected. It is painful when I see friends from the secular world misrepresenting what Scripture says and what Christianity is all about. I don't want to fight about it. But at some point, we have to make a stand. We must make Christ the centerpiece of our lives despite the consequences.

God calls us to faithfulness in everything. Maybe that is about making sure we're known as Christians in public places unashamedly. Maybe it's also about integrity – making sure that our faith and our actions match, that we're the same followers of Jesus in private as we are in public. Faithfulness has been described as a “long obedience in the same direction.” Are we going in the direction of Jesus, and are we still obeying?

The good news is, there is a reward waiting for us at the end. The crown of life, the promise of life after death, where judgment is no longer an issue, it all awaits us who stay steadfast and cling to the hope of Jesus. No hoping that we're good enough, no worries that our sins are too big for Jesus to clean us from – we have the promise of eternal life. Stay faithful, and all this is yours. May we examine ourselves to see, if in our contexts, we are faithful or not.

Moving on to the letter to Pergamum. Here Jesus introduces himself as the One “who has the sharp, double-edged sword.” That's a sign of discipline coming, but one that's necessary – cutting away the problems in the church, a surgery that can remove the cancer growing here.

Now no city has a more stunning description than Pergamum, the place where Satan lives and has his throne. If Ephesus was the city of mysticism and magic, Pergamum was the center of pagan worship. This was where emperor worship was born. This is where you'd find a giant monument to Zeus. This was also the home of the worship of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing represented by a snake. Seeing that Satan disguised himself as a serpent in the garden of Eden, it's not hard to see the connections. While we're not going to discuss it now, what Jesus says reminds us that the spiritual world is real. We are engaged in a spiritual battle. The enemy can never overcome us as long as we live and turn to Jesus. But there is a real enemy – the spiritual forces that oppose the work of God.

Christians here were surrounded by the worship of false gods. Yet the church had remained faithful to Jesus, and they had withstood a trial similar to the one Jesus warned Smyrna about, where one of the believers was put to death for their faith. Jesus complements them for holding fast to their faith. Their faith is a model to other churches.

But there's a problem, not with everyone but with some of the people of the church – they've been enticed. Balaam was a foreign prophet who was hired by a king of Moab, Balak, to curse Israel, but God kept him from doing it. Instead, Balaam urged Balak to get the Israelites to sin and then essentially curse themselves. That's precisely what happened.

We don't know the details, but some in the church are doing the same thing – trying to get the other believers in the church to join them in their wickedness. In a city where idol worship was huge, it would be easy to compromise and buy meat that had been sacrificed to other gods – not a big deal in some places, as Paul wrote about in his first letter to Corinth. But here in the center of pagan worship, you couldn't get away from the spiritual implications. And since sexual immorality was part and parcel of pagan culture, it was all around them. The Nicolaitans that we talked about last week did the same sort of things.

Jesus' simple word to them is, repent! Change your mind! Turn around and follow me instead! Get rid of the immorality in your midst and return to me. And Jesus warns that if they don't turn, eventually He will spiritually wage war against the people in the church who are defying Him. Jesus will not allow His church to be destroyed by those who are willfully sliding back into their old pagan ways and trying to call it Christianity.

Here's our modern day reminder: *Christ calls us to die to ourselves daily and to wage war against the remaining sin in our lives.* As much as we wish it was, repentance isn't a once-and-done sort of thing. The more we do it, the more it becomes a habit, the more second nature it will become, but it will still always be hard. Repentance requires daily accountability.

Literally translated, the passage says that Balaam taught Balak to place a stumbling block before the sons of Israel. Now you all know, I don't need much of a stumbling block to be kinda clumsy. I already trip over my own feet easily enough. But you put a block in front of me, I'm probably going to trip over it. But if I know it's there, I can walk around it; I can pick it up and move it; I can avoid it. Sometimes I try to go over the stumbling block and fall over my own feet, but if I already know about it, that's my own fault.

Repentance in action often means looking out for stumbling blocks and working to remove them from the paths of others. Changing your mind means changing your way of doing things, avoiding pathways that lead to sin. The language of modern psychology talks about "triggers," things that "trigger" bad habits. We might understand that language better. What is it that triggers you that you need to avoid to avoid sinning?

If you're on a diet and every day you stop by Dairy Queen on the way home, maybe you need to find a different route. If going to the mall makes you jealous of all the things you can't buy, maybe you need to order online. If watching certain films or actors or actresses gets your mind headed the wrong direction, turn it off; move on.

Your triggers might not be my triggers, but identifying those spiritual stumbling blocks before you trip over them is important. Because from my own experience, once you start stumbling, the enemy just puts more of the same blocks in front of you. You can't stop the blocks, but you can stop falling headfirst over them.

And removing stumbling blocks from in front of others shows spiritual maturity. This is not pointing other people's mistakes or flaws or even their sins, or gloating in their failures. It's helping others spot problems before they start, or helping them make changes to avoid them in the future.

Sometimes it means skipping things that are fine for us but not for them. If your friend has problems with alcohol, you don't just disinvite them from going to the bar; you find something else to do with them. If you know they struggle with gossip, don't plan on an outing with a bunch of girlfriends that can't help themselves when they're together. This is not easy; it's giving up a little of our freedom to help a friend succeed in walking with Christ. That's spiritual maturity in a nutshell.

And what rewards there are for developing that spiritual maturity! Here, the overcoming is promised "some of the hidden manna." We remember that manna from heaven was how God fed the Israelites in the wilderness between Egypt and the promised land. God will sustain us through the trial; He will supply our needs. The manna is hidden, which means we aren't expecting it; we can't see what God will provide until He provides it. Yet as we fight against our weakness, God will give us the support we need from His own supply.

The overcomer is also promised a white stone with a new name written on it, a name given to the overcomer by Christ that is His alone to know. Now white stones were used in antiquity and in the Jewish court when someone voted to acquit, to say "not guilty." The white stone represents our purity before God through the blood of Jesus. The white stone is God saying, "Not guilty," to us.

And God is in the habit of giving His people new names to represent who they are. Abram became Abraham, the father of nations. Sarai became Sarah, princess of nations. Jacob became Israel, meaning "he wrestles with God." Simon became Peter, the rock. God has a name for us, one that describes us better than we can describe ourselves. God gives us a new identity, a new way of being that strips away what came before. This promise is for all of us who stay faithful, repent, and overcome.

May we be the ones who have an ear to hear what the Spirit says to the churches and to us today through these letters.