



THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA
Are You Playing It Safe?
Revelation 2:8-11

The Church at Canyon Creek, Austin, Texas
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When I was a kid, we lived dangerously, and we played dangerously. When I was a kid, we didn't wear floaties in the pool; our parents just threw us in and expected us to swim. When I was a kid, we didn't sit in a car seat until we were 12 years old. We didn't even have seatbelts in cars when I was a kid. I sat in the front seat, and my mom's right arm was my seatbelt. And when I was a kid, we didn't wear helmets or kneepads; we didn't even have sunscreen back in my day.

Here's what playgrounds looked like in my day. We had 20' tall swing sets, that you make you make fly. We had this thing called Giant Strides, "from the Spalding all-steel family." Everyone grabbed on, and ran around it, and when you picked up enough speed, you started flying. But the problem was when someone let go; the metal handle kept swinging. Someone would get hit the head, and there would be blood, but the teachers just put another kid into battle. But the terror of the playground was the metal slide. Sitting all day in the hot sun, it was a test of childhood courage to slide down the metal slide. And when I was in elementary school, girls wore dresses and not pants. I don't see how they did it. Sliding down that hot metal slide would burn the skin off the back of your legs. Yes, in my day, we played dangerously. Not like today. I think parents and kids play it too safe today.

And, I think we can play it safe spiritually too.

Last week, we began a series called *First Love*. It's about Jesus being the "first love" of our lives. It's about Jesus having "first place in everything" (Colossians 1:18).

In the book of Revelation, Jesus dictated seven letters to the Apostle John and instructed him to send these letters to seven specific churches. In these letters, Jesus encouraged each church and He confronted each church. As we study these seven churches, we must ask ourselves ... *Could Jesus be saying this to us, as a church? Could Jesus be saying this to me?*

In these letters, His words are strong and direct. Because, Jesus said, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline" (Revelation 3:19).

To one of the churches in Revelation, to Ephesus, Jesus said, "*You have left your first love*" (Revelation 2:4). And we have to ask the obvious question, could He be saying that to us? What was true in that day is true in our day. We have a tendency to drift. If we're not careful, we become complacent, we compromise, we grow cold, and we just don't love Him like we used to. And when it happens, His words are strong and direct. "Wake up! ... Remember who you are! ... Repent, and come back to Me!" I believe Jesus is speaking to us, because He loves us. If there is any drift or complacency in our lives, He is going to confront it. I believe He is calling us to lives of passion and zeal; which is the only appropriate, grateful, humble response to the love and sacrifice and grace of Jesus. So, over the next weeks, each of us must answer the question, is Jesus our "first love" or not?

This morning, we're going to read the letter to the church at Smyrna. As we do, we will see that the Christians in Smyrna lived dangerously. They did not play it safe. ***The Christians in Smyrna were willing to make their faith known publicly, knowing it would place them in uncomfortable and dangerous situations. So the question is, are we willing to do the same, or are we content with playing it safe?***

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

Revelation 2:8-11. Jesus dictated to John,

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. 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. 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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.’” (Revelation 2:8-11, ESV).¹

Only four verses. Only 129 words. Like the length of a quick email, rather than a heart-felt letter. But this is Jesus speaking. Imagine how treasured His words must have been to the believers at Smyrna, who were enduring unimaginable persecution for their faith. They received a letter from Jesus!! Notice that Jesus only complimented the church at Smyrna. He did not confront them like He did the other six churches. He complimented them for not playing it safe, which was not easy in the city of Smyrna.

Ancient Smyrna is the modern-day city of Izmir, Turkey. It is now, and it was then, a beautiful port city off the Aegean Sea. Ancient Smyrna was called the “ornament of Asia.”² With its ocean breezes, Smyrna would remind us of an ocean city like Malibu, California. The agora was the city center, the marketplace. It was the center of activity in Smyrna. Pagan temples lined the mountain range of Pagus in the distance. And the broad, paved streets were named after the many Roman gods.

During the time in which Jesus dictated this letter to John, persecution was intense. For 15 years, a named Domitian reigned as emperor of Rome. Here is a picture of Domitian and his lovely wife Domitia Longina. I just had to show you that hairstyle, let's hope that doesn't make a comeback anytime soon. Domitian demanded that citizens address him as “our Lord and God,” and he was the fiercest of the Roman emperors.³ When the early Christians refused to call Domitian “Lord,” “they were sentenced to die by the thousands. Some were thrown to the lions in the great coliseum, and some were burned at the stake. Others were wrapped in the skins of wild animals and fed to dogs or dipped in tar and lit as torches for the emperor's garden. Still others were crucified, including mothers with their babies draped around their necks.”⁴ It was in such a terrifying time that Jesus sent this letter to the Christians in Smyrna. It was written to comfort them and to inspire hope, not only for these first century believers, but for believers in every generation.

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life, says this ...” (Revelation 2:8, ESV). This letter is from the one who is “the first

and the last.” He is the eternal one. He has existed for all eternity, and through Him, everything that has been made was made.⁵ This letter is from the one “who died” on the cross as the substitute for our sin, and the one who supernaturally rose from the dead, proving to be the Son of God and proving that everything He said is true. This letter is from the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ!

Jesus complimented and consoled the Christians at Smyrna. “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” (Revelation 2:9, ESV). There were consequences for going public as a Christian in Smyrna. There was a severe price to pay.

They were slandered by “those who say that they are Jews and are not.” Jewish religious leaders joined Roman authorities to harass the church in an attempt to drive Christians from the city. Jesus dared to call these Jews, God’s people, the “synagogue of Satan”! He also said this to their face one time. “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44, ESV). The Christians in Smyrna were being harassed by Jewish religious leaders just as Jesus had been harassed by Jewish religious leaders.

Jesus noted their “poverty.” It was common for Christians to be overlooked for jobs, and for Christian businesses to be ransacked. Many Christian families were destitute and found it hard to feed their families. But Jesus complimented them and said, “But you are rich.” Slander, poverty, and tribulation may have been a way of life, but Jesus reminded them that they were spiritually rich. Their faith was like a treasure, and the dividends would come one day in heaven.

Jesus said, “I know your tribulation.” This Greek word refers to pressure. It means to crush.⁶ Jesus did not ignore the reality of their situation. They were literally being crushed for their faith and love for Jesus.

Paul and Peter echo the reality of tribulation for any Christian who takes a stand for Jesus. Paul said, “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12, ESV). Peter said, “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you ... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:14, 16, NIV).

The bishop of Smyrna was Polycarp. Polycarp was an old man when the Romans came for him. The city was crowded for a day of public games. Then a chant rose up in the crowd to do away with the Christians. So, who better to execute than their leader, the bishop of Smyrna? Polycarp was dragged into the arena as the crowds jeered. The captain of the guard begged the old man to vow allegiance to Caesar and save his life. But Polycarp refused. History records the final words of Polycarp. “Eighty and six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?”⁷ Polycarp wasn’t about to deny Jesus with heaven so close.

Think about this moment in history. Many in the church of Smyrna died for their faith. Every Christian in Smyrna personally knew someone who had died for their faith.

That makes the words of Jesus very timely, very relevant. “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” (Revelation 2:10, ESV).

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer.” It’s not over. There’s more to come. It’s going to get worse. In fact, God has granted Satan permission to do it. And they had to trust it was for the purpose and glory of God. Some ten-day period of persecution was to come. Normally, we would read this as an actual ten-day period, but since Revelation is apocalyptic literature, we must consider this being symbolic of something else. Some have suggested this refers to ten periods of Roman persecution. This ten-day conflict is hard to identify, yet it does suggest it is temporary, and that even though Satan was about to crush them, the church would prevail.⁸

“Be faithful unto death,” Jesus said, “and I will give you the crown of life ... The one who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death” (Revelation 2:10-11, ESV). Jesus promised that death is not final for us. The first death is physical death, and yes, we will die. But we will not face the “second death”; which is hell, the lake of fire, and eternal damnation.⁹ This is the promise of eternal life. The letter began with Jesus being described as “the first and the last,” the eternal one, and described as the one “who died and came to life” (Revelation 2:8, ESV). Jesus endured the worst, and so would they. Jesus overcame death, and so would they.

ARE YOU PLAYING IT SAFE?

What do we do with the letter to the church at Smyrna? When most pastors preach on persecution, the application usually sounds something like this. “If they were willing to die for their faith, you ought to be willing to work with 5th grade boys!” Or, “If they were willing to die for their faith, you ought to be willing to tithe to the church!”

I don’t think that’s application Jesus has in mind. I don’t even think Jesus is asking if we are willing to die for Him. I think He’s asking us if we are willing to live for Him! I think He’s asking us if He is our “first love” or not. Does He have first place or not?

The Christians in Smyrna lived dangerously. They didn’t play it safe. *The Christians in Smyrna were willing to make their faith known publicly, knowing it would place them in uncomfortable and dangerous situations. So the question is, are we willing to do the same, or are we content to play it safe?*

What do I mean by playing it safe? It’s the same at school, at work, or in your neighborhood. Playing it safe is being a nice person. It’s being a good person, and hoping that somehow, that will point people to Jesus. It’s waiting until someone else brings up Jesus. Playing it safe goes further though. It’s fitting in with the crowd. It’s smiling at jokes. It’s staying quiet instead of speaking up. It’s admitting you go to church, but leaving Jesus out of your conversations. Playing it safe is calculating the circumstances and doing whatever you have to do to avoid conflict.

This past fall, Francis Chan spoke in Washington, DC, and he challenged Christians to lay down their lives, to sacrifice their comfort, and to be bold with the Gospel of Jesus. He said,

“We live in a time when Christians are starting to change their theology because they are ashamed of the words of Jesus Christ, because it’s not popular. We also tend to focus on things other than the Gospel, on good things, that I believe is a cop-out in Christianity today. Many are willing to care for the poor, fight human trafficking, and work toward racial reconciliation. And these are all good, important, biblical causes. But I’m noticing very few people are spreading the Gospel, and I think I know why. I’ve never been persecuted for feeding the poor. And I’m applauded when I speak against human trafficking. No one gets angry at me for that. But when I tell someone that they have sinned against a holy God and will one day stand before His judgment, and when I tell someone that Jesus is the only name by which a person can enter heaven, and when I read the Scripture to someone as truth, then I get persecuted. If you take a stand like that, you will lose your reputation, you will lose friends, and you may get hurt.” And then Francis said, “It’s time we get hurt.”¹⁰

Francis Chan also wrote, “I’ve made a commitment to consistently put myself in situations that scare me and require God to come through. When I survey my life, I realize that *those* times have been the most meaningful and satisfying of my life. They were the times when I truly experienced life and God.”¹¹

The Christians in Smyrna were willing to make their faith known publicly, knowing it would place them in uncomfortable and dangerous situations. Are we willing to do the same, or are we content to play it safe?

So, where is the courage? Where is the boldness? Where is the risk? The Lord said to Joshua, “Be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9, NLT). He promises to be with us too. So, what risk is Jesus asking you to take? What step of obedience does Jesus expect you to take? Are you willing to be a visible and vocal follower of Jesus Christ?

This is personal. In His letter, Jesus moved from warning the entire church, to making an appeal to the individual. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:11, ESV). ***The Christians in Smyrna were willing to make their faith known publicly, knowing it would place them in uncomfortable and dangerous situations. Are you willing to do the same, or are you content to play it safe?***

CONCLUSION

Acts 11:26 has always grabbed my attention. It’s about real people, people who were unashamed to be visible and vocal followers of Jesus. It’s when followers of Jesus embraced a new name. ***“The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”*** “Christian” was actually an insult.¹² So odd were these followers of Christ that the people of Antioch would ask, and this is an actual quote from the first century, “Who are these people? Oh, these are the people who are always talking about Christos, the Christ-people,” and with a demeaning sneer, “the Christians.”¹³

But Peter turned that name of shame into a name of pride. “If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you ... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:14, 16, NIV) What was meant to be an insult was turned into a compliment. One historian writes about our first

century brothers and sisters, “They continually talked about Christ ... They were constantly sharing the good news ... They were filled and flooded with Christ. His name was on their lips and his character was being formed in them. They were making visible the invisible Christ.”¹⁴

Hopefully, we too are willing to be visible and vocal followers of Jesus. Hopefully, we too proudly and humbly bear His name. And hopefully, we too realize there is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name Christian.

Think about the Christ you represent.

- We bear the name of the one who bore our sins on the cross. As the hammer raised to drive the nail into His hand, Jesus could have stopped everything. But He didn't.¹⁵ Because He cared more about saving us than saving Himself.
- We bear the name of the one who is preparing a place in heaven for us right now, the one who promises to return and take us home to live with Him forever in Paradise.¹⁶
- We bear the name of the one before whom, one day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord.¹⁷
- We bear the name of the one whom all of heaven is praising at this very moment. “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain ... To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever” (Revelation 5:12-13, NAS).

There is no greater privilege or greater responsibility than bearing the name Christian.

The Christians in Smyrna were willing to make their faith known publicly, knowing it would place them in uncomfortable and dangerous situations. Are you willing do the same, or are you content with playing it safe?

NOTES

¹ ESV uses the word “conquers,” while the NAS uses the word “overcomes.”

² William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, Volume 1, The Daily Bible Study Series (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), page 73.

³ *Ibid.*, page 19.

⁴ Anne Graham Lotz, *The Vision of His Glory: Finding Hope through the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996, 1997), page 20.

⁵ See Colossians 1:15-18.

⁶ The Greek word for “tribulation” is θλίψις, which means to press or crush.

⁷ Barclay, page 76.

⁸ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), page 61.

⁹ See Revelation 20:6, 14.

¹⁰ Paraphrased from Francis Chan’s speech at America’s Tent of Meeting, October 8, 2017, Washington, DC.

¹¹ Francis Chan, *Crazy Love* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008), page 169.

¹² At Paul’s trial, King Agrippa sarcastically said to Paul, “In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian” (Acts 26:28).

¹³ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), page 228.

¹⁴ Gary Vanderet, “The First Christians: Acts 11:19-30,” Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino, January 2, 2005.

¹⁵ Max Lucado beautifully writes, “Since He couldn’t bear the thought of eternity without you, He choose the nails.” [Max Lucado, *He Choose the Nails*, (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2000), page 34.]

¹⁶ See John 14:2-3.

¹⁷ See Philippians 2:9-11.