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.”

Revelation 2:1-3:21 is about Jesus Christ’s messages to the seven churches. Today’s passage covers the messages to the first two churches, the churches in Ephesus and in Smyrna. Before I mention the messages for these two churches, I want to share the similarities and differences of Christ’s messages among these seven churches. First, all the seven messages start with the identity of Jesus, who is described differently in each church. We’ll study two out of the seven today. Jesus said in verse 1. “***To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.***” Jesus identified himself as the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. Here, seven stars indicate seven angels, the seven golden lampstands, the seven churches. (1:20) This means that Jesus is the head of the seven churches and he is the overseer and shepherd of all churches. Paul said in Colossians 1:18, “*And he (Jesus) is the head of the body, the church;*…” A church is not a building, but an assembly of the believers. *Ecclesia* means the assembly of being called out. Jesus said in Matthew 18:20, “*For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them*.” So, a church can be a congregation of millions, or of thousand, or even two or three who gather in Jesus’ name. In the view of Revelations each person can be a church, too. So the message of Jesus to the seven churches is the message to our church, to our family, and even to each person today.

In verse 8 in the message to the church in Smyrna, Jesus introduced himself as the one who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. In chapter 1:8 &18 Jesus introduced himself as the Almighty Everlasting God, who died for our sins and rose again for our eternal life. Each description has its own meaning and purpose according to the needs and conditions of each church. Another common factor for Christ’s message to the seven churches is that Jesus knows the spiritual condition of each church. So, Jesus repeats, “*I know, I know, I know, I know*”, four times. (2,9) Jesus commends their goodness and rebukes their wrongness. He urges their repentance and warns them with punishments. He also promises rewards for those who are victorious, and each reward is different from each church according to their needs. We will study all of these in detail later.

The church in Ephesus was built by Apostle Paul during his second missionary journey. Acts 19 explains it in detail. When Paul visited the city of Ephesus, there were some believers who had been converted by Priscilla and Aquila. They received only John’s baptism which meant the baptism of repentance. When Paul baptized them in the name of Jesus Christ, they all received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues and prophesied.(Ac 19:6) There was opposition and persecution from the Jews, so Paul took his disciples and taught the word of truth in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for two and half years. The Bible says that all people in the city and around the district of Asia heard the word of God during this period. There was great work of the Holy Spirit in the city of Ephesus through Paul. Many of those who believed came and openly confessed what they had done. People who had practiced sorcery brought their expensive scrolls and burned them publicly as an expression of their repentance. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. (Ac 19:20)

Where there was the work of the Holy Spirit, there was also the work of Satan. A silversmith named Demetrius, who ran a business for the temple of Artemis, the goddess of Ephesus, stirred the city people to start a riot against Paul and his ministry. There was great commotion and persecution against Paul and his church. Great danger attacked Paul. But God raised a city clerk who disassembled the mob and calmed the riot in the city. (19:23-41)

What was Christ’s message to this Ephesus Church? Look at verses 2-3. “***I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary***.” Jesus commended the believer’s good deeds and hard work for the Lord, perseverance for the gospel, and their discerning spirits against false teachings. Indeed, the Ephesus Church was a role model for all churches around it. In 1 and 2 Corinthians Paul pointed out many problems in the Corinthian Church in and out such as division among the believers, lawsuits, sexual immorality, food sacrificed to idols, attitude to worship, spiritual gifts, and so on. Paul wrote two long letters with 29 chapters (16ch +13ch), to counsel them and resolve these problems in the Lord. But in Ephesians, his letter to the believers in the Ephesus Church, Paul didn’t point out any problems among them. In the six chapters in Ephesians Paul only encouraged them to share their spiritual blessings and gave them some instructions for Christian living. In this way the Ephesus Church seemed to have nothing to be blamed or corrected.

But what was Christ’s message to them in the book of Revelation? Look at verses 4-6. “***Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.***” Christ’s message is simple. They are changed in the wrong direction. They forsook their first love for Jesus and lost their heart for the Lord. We don’t know how their faith degenerated until they were rebuked. They might have been influenced by false teachings and false teachers. They might have compromised with persecution. Or they might have been tempted by worldly desires and wealth. What is first love? First love is our devotion and commitment when we begin to love someone or something. People usually say that first love makes us blind. When a young couple loves each other, they become blind for each other. They confess to each other saying, “You mean everything to me!” They think about each other all day long 24/7. They want to spend time together all day long. They are ready to sacrifice everything for each other. When Christians are born again, we experience the same for Jesus. We really love Jesus and commit ourselves to him. We are happy to think about Jesus all day long. We are happy to find him through reading the Bible and in praying in a private room. We are willing to sacrifice our time, money, relationships, future, and even our lives for Jesus because we love him. We are happy to be with him and to see him in heaven when we get there. I believe that the believers in the Ephesus church experienced the same. They worked hard and served the Lord with all their hearts and might. They repented their sins and burned their expensive scrolls in public. It was like a young man burning all his X-movies and videos after he devoted himself to Jesus. They greatly enjoyed freedom from their sins and experienced the grace of Jesus and the love of God. They devoted themselves to Bible study in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

But, as time passed by, they began to change little by little. Their hearts became cold and their devotion was gone. Their life in the church and their relationship with the Lord and with other believers became superficial. They had a godly form, but had no spiritual content, such as fever or zeal, for the Lord. They lost their first love for the Lord and forsake their first commitment and devotion to the Lord. Jesus rebuked them to restore their first love. If they don’t repent, he will remove their lampstands from them. (5) Jesus meant that they would lose their spiritual blessings and benefits from the Lord. They would be like Cain who was banished from the Garden of Eden after he had committed sins before God. (Ge 4:16) Consider and Repent!

We understand how difficult it is for us to maintain our first love for Jesus. Without our personal struggle against our sin, such as laziness, complacency, unbelief, rebellion, disobedience, we easily become corrupt and degenerate. Love is not always feeling. But feeling is an important part of love. So, we must restore our love for the Lord until we are happy and satisfied with Jesus alone. Paul encouraged his young disciple Timothy in 1 Tim 4, “*Train yourself to be godly…Put your hope in the living God…Set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity…Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress…*” (1 Ti 4:7-16) We must train ourselves to be godly and to show our progress in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity, and so on. Let us open the Bible and start everyday with the word of God. Let us read the word of God until our heart burns with the Holy Spirit. Let us restore our personal prayer and have deep fellowship with Jesus. Let us pray for the sick, the needy, and the lost with Jesus’ compassion.

Jesus commended the believers in the Ephesus Church who hated the practice of the Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans were one of the religious sects who condoned emperor worship. We’ll study more about the Nicolaitans next week. As I mentioned before, the Lord Jesus promised rewards for each church to those who are victorious. What was the reward for the victors in the Ephesus Church? Look at verse 7. “***Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God***.” The tree of life was in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2. After Adam’s Fall, God banished man from the garden and protected the tree of life. Now, this tree of life is in the kingdom of heaven. Rev 22:1-2 says that on each side of the river in heaven stands the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are the healing of the nations. So, to have the right to eat from the tree of life means to have eternal life and enter to the kingdom of heaven. The paradise of God is the kingdom of heaven. Our paradise is not on this earth, but in heaven. The kingdom of heaven, where the tree of life awaits for us, is our eternal and permanent dwelling place and our paradise. Amen.

Verses 8-11is Jesus’ message to the church in Smyrna. The city of Smyrna was located 60 miles north from the city of Ephesus. Smyrna was the center of emperor worship in the province of Asia. The Roman Empire gave religious freedom to her colonies for the sake of *Pax Romana*. But the Emperor Domitian ordered all colonies to worship him by law. Those who refused to worship the emperor were put to death. The Christians in Smyrna refused to worship the emperor. So there was severe persecution towards the Christians. Polycarp was the bishop of the church in Smyrna. He was also known as the disciple of Apostle John. He was threatened death because he refused to worship the emperor. So, he was burned alive, but kept his faith to the point of death. He said, “Eighty-six years have I served Christ, and he has never done me wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?” He was faithful to the Lord to the point of death. Those who kept their faith amid severe persecution had hope of eternal life. They believed the resurrection of body. They believed that they would rise again after they died. Jesus identified himself in verse 8. “***These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.***” Jesus is the firstfruits of resurrection. He died and came back alive. This was the encouraging message to the martyrs in the church of Smyrna.

The Christians in Smyrna suffered from affliction and poverty. Because of their faith they lost all social benefits and privilege. They were rejected by their community. But they were rich because of Jesus. They were poor in this world, but rich because of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus said, “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*.” (Lk 6:20) Poverty and persecution were daily challenge to the believers in the church. How did Jesus encourage them? Look at verses 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 life as your victor’s crown.***” Here, ten days symbolizes a relatively short period of time. Our sufferings are short, but our glory will be eternal. As Paul said, our present sufferings are not worth compared to the glory in the future. (Ro 8:18) When we become faithful to the point of death, the Lord Jesus will give us the crown of life. When a marathoner perseveres and finishes his race, he receives the winner’s crown. In the same way when we finish our race, we will receive the victor’s crown as our reward. As verse 11 says, we’ll not be hurt at all by the second death. Let’s read verse 11. “***Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death***.” Remember how much Jesus loved you when you were walking in darkness. Remember what you promised to Jesus when your sins were forgiven. Restore your heart and restart your devotion to him. Be faithful to him until we see him again in the kingdom of heaven. Amen!