



## MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

[www.mzluth.org](http://www.mzluth.org)

September 29, 2013

Pentecost 19

Sermon Text: [Revelation 2:8-10](#)

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: [Ecclesiastes 5:8-20](#)

Psalm of the Day: [Psalm 146](#)

Second Lesson: [Revelation 2:8-10](#)

Gospel Lesson: [Luke 16:19-31](#)

### **The Believer Grows In Christian Character Christians Find Real Wealth In Heavenly Treasure**

In Christ, dear fellow redeemed:

You may not know much about Smyrna, but my guess is you've heard some of the words I read to you before. The second part of verse 10, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown," probably for some of you that are here was your confirmation verse. That's my guess. I know it's at least one person's who is here because it was mine.

When you hear that verse, when you hear the word "crown," what is the first thing that comes to your mind? I'm guessing for most of us it's royalty. A royal crown. A king's crown. Scripturally speaking I guess that kind of fits because God tells us that those who are with the Lord in heaven in eternity will rule. So I suppose that crown could fit, but honestly, I think the crown he is talking about is not the king's crown, even though they used them at that time. I think the crown he is talking about is some vegetation, a laurel wreath, some leaves that were woven together and made into a wreath that would be set on someone's head after they won an athletic competition. It's kind of what the NIV 2011 is leading you to when he says, "I'll give you the victor's crown." Not the king's crown, but the victor's crown. When you read it in context of what I just read to you, I think that really fits.

In his letter to these Christians that were in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Smyrna, he is telling them that there is trouble coming and you're competing for your very life. He's not talking about ruling. He's talking about overcoming and defeating the enemy. He's saying, "I'll give you that crown of life when you are faithful to me."

So what he is really reminding the Christians there in Smyrna, and he is reminding us, is that our true wealth is found not in the wealth the Lord may or may not give us in this world, but as Christians, the wealth that will sustain us through thick and thin is the wealth God has given us through the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Jesus Christ. That's what we want to focus on today.

I don't know if you've read the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 or not, but it's really an interesting exercise. A few years back, when I had more time at the end of a confirmation year in the school, we studied the seven letters to the seven churches. Then I had the kids write a Jesus letter to Morrison. It was really an

interesting exercise. It was really kind of fun to see what they would say. The way all the letters are set up, except for two, is that Jesus commends the church, the congregation there for something and then he says, "But I have this against you." So we worked through all that and said if you were Jesus, what would you write today?

Some of the things he had against the other churches were where he said, "You've lost your first love. You loved your Savior at first and now you're more concerned with other things." Or, like the church in Laodicea, which we read this summer sometime, he said, "You're neither hot nor cold. You're lukewarm, so I'm about to spit you out." That had to be kind of terrifying to get in a little letter from Jesus. "I'm about to spit you out of my mouth." That ought to have scared them I would think. But there are two letters, this one, Smyrna, and Philadelphia, where he has no "but I have this against you," where he only speaks words of commendation and he points them to his promises to keep them strong as they struggle...this one and the letter to Philadelphia.

This letter to this group of Christians in Asia Minor at the town of Smyrna I think has a phrase in here that every Christian would do well to pay attention to. He identifies himself as Jesus, as the one talking to the angel of the church in Smyrna. The angel means "messenger." It would be like the pastor, the one who gave the message from God to that congregation. He says, "Write this to them so he can share it with the people: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last" (or like we have in the balcony in the window up there, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and Last Letter of the Greek Alphabet), "who died and came to life again." So what he is saying is, "This is Jesus. I'm talking to you. This is what I want you to know."

Here's the phrase. It's a short phrase. It's a simple phrase. You might have overlooked it, but it's a comforting phrase as we go through life in this world. Twice he says to them, "I know. I know your afflictions and your poverty. I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. I know what is going on in your lives" is what Jesus is saying to them. Think of how important that is. Think of how often Christians through the ages, including some of us here today, have thought, "God, where are you? Aren't you paying attention to what I'm going through? Don't you know what is going on? Why would you let this happen?" That had to be something that the Christians in Smyrna were thinking. He says, "I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!"

One of their struggles was the absence of worldly wealth. How it came about, we aren't told for certain. We do know from church history that quite often what happened is that at times various persecutions would break out against Christians because Christians became an easy scapegoat for the Roman emperor. From time to time more severe persecution would break out. One of the things they often did is they would say to everyone, "Make an offering as a sacrifice to the emperor" because they regarded the emperor as divine.

So put yourself in the shoes of someone there at Smyrna. You are a recent convert to Christianity. Most of them were. You had grown up worshiping some other god and

now you believe that Jesus lived and died in your place. You believe in the Lord, who made heaven and earth. You believe he loves you and he has forgiven you and he has given you eternity through the life and death of Jesus. And you don't want to worship anyone else but him because you've finally seen this. This is the most important thing in your life now. Then, someone who doesn't like you tells the officials during one of these persecutions, "Go ask him to sacrifice to the emperor. They aren't going to do it." When they didn't do it, quite often what they would do, sometimes they might be put to death but more commonly what often would happen is they would take all your property. Everything you had in the world.

Can you imagine? Now you have found the Savior of the world. You love him and you serve him, and now you've lost everything! Do you think Satan was there whispering in their ears? "You dummy! Why did you buy into this Christian stuff? Look what it has cost you!" You have to believe that was a big temptation, right? Worldly wealth you can see. I can't see the glory of heaven yet. Worldly wealth and it's absence and the problems it causes, that I can see, taste, touch, smell and feel.

So God comes to them and says, "Don't think that I don't know what you are going through. I know what you are going through. I know your poverty, but you have to remember, you are rich. You have a wealth that lasts forever. You have the forgiveness of sins. You have the promise of eternity. This world is here and gone, but you are rich because you have me. Don't abandon that. Don't let this struggle, even with the Jews who were claiming to be God's people and often wanted to get Christians in trouble or attack them or come from within and say you have to also do the Laws of Moses and that Jesus alone isn't enough, don't let that synagogue of Satan fool you. They aren't Abraham's children because they don't have the faith of Abraham." The same thing Paul said is what he is saying here when he says, "Those who say they are Jews and are not, they might have the blood of Abraham but they don't have the faith of Abraham, so they are a synagogue of Satan. Don't be afraid. I know what you are going through. Don't be afraid."

Then he tells them it's only going to get worse. "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." They are going to be thrown in prison. They are going to suffer. They are going to be persecuted. The numbers in Revelation are usually symbolic, not literal. I would tend to think "ten days" is symbolic, a short limited time that God knows. That's what he is trying to stress to them. "I know what you're going through. It's going to be a struggle. It's not going to be easy. You're going to go through difficult things, but be faithful to me and the victor's crown is yours because I've already won it for you."

He's talking about a struggle. He's talking about overcoming the struggle by staying close to your God. Don't think he doesn't know. He knows. Don't think that your life is miserable because you don't have worldly wealth, because you have riches that are far beyond worldly wealth. Those are things that are timeless temptations of Satan, aren't they?

Have you ever struggled with some of those same thoughts? God, where are you? Why are you letting this happen? Don't you love me? If you loved me, you wouldn't let this happen to me. I think we've all had those thoughts at times. Those temptations are going to come. They most certainly are sin when we buy into that lie of Satan, but we need to keep going back to the promises of our God. He knows.

He knows what we are. That's why he sent his Son to live and die in our place and take away our sins. He knows we can't do it on our own, so he gives us the Holy Spirit to live in our hearts, to strengthen us through the Word and the Sacrament, so we can face these things, so we can be faithful. He tells us to be faithful, but he is the one who keeps us faithful.

That same promise he made to the Christians in Smyrna is the promise he makes to you and to me today. But for the most part, in the society we live in, it's not a threat that we are going to be thrown in jail, is it? I don't think any of you woke up this morning and looked over your shoulder to see if the police were going to follow you on the way to worship and arrest you and throw you into jail because you were going to go worship Jesus. That's not our threat.

Honestly, I think when you look at Scripture what you find is, when the Gospel first comes into an area, Satan threatens people with physical violence or that kind of persecution. But then after the Gospel has been there for awhile and people cling to Jesus through that kind of suffering and grow closer to Jesus through that kind of suffering, Satan goes to different temptations. More subtle forms of persecution. The kind of thing where people around you pat you on the head and say, "That's cute. You're a Christian. You believe God created the world when obviously it evolved from something else." That kind of thing to try to undermine your confidence in God's Word. I think that's what Satan does.

I also think this is what Satan does. He becomes much more subtle and gets us to become Laodiceans and become apathetic to the Word of God, having a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to the Word of God. If we aren't connected to the Word of God and those persecutions or those sufferings or those challenges in our life come, and they will come, it's a lot harder for us to remain faithful even to the point of death because we don't rely on the strength of God's Word. We start relying on ourselves, and we just aren't that strong.

You and I will face many different things in our life where we will need God's strength because our strength alone will not face it. That's why our God reminds us over and over again that he knows, and he points us to his promises and being faithful to him and clinging to him.

This past Monday night the Youth Group finished a study on worship in the life of a teenager. We started it last year and just finished the last lesson now over the last three weeks. I found it fascinating. But the last lesson I really thought was interesting. It was "worship when I don't feel like it." That's not just in a teenagers life. There are

times when we don't feel like worshipping. The introduction to the lesson made a great point. Worship comes from a word that means "worth-ship". God is worthy of us stopping to praise him because of who he is and what he has done. That never changes. He always remains worthy. What changes though is us. Sometimes we buy into Satan's lies that God isn't really worthy of my time and my effort and my praise for whatever reason.

So this last week what we did is looked at lies of Satan, a few of them, and then the kids would come up with their own. They did a good job of coming up with them. And then we would refute them Scripturally and spiritually. What is the truth that God has spoken in Scripture that reveals this lie of Satan? They did well. They handled the Word of God well, which I would expect. But what I found really interesting is after we talked about this lie of Satan...have you ever felt this way? "I don't need to go to worship. It's the same thing every week. We're sinners. Jesus saved us. Yeah, yeah, I know that. I want something new and different. It's the same thing all the time." Have you ever thought that in your life? I think we probably have at one time or another, right?

The kids gave me really good answers, but then afterwards I said, "Think about it this way. What if you came to worship every week and you bought into that lie, you'd like things different, not the same all the time, and the message changed every week?" You'd come one week and the messenger says, "God loves you and has forgiven you through the life and death of Jesus. Your sins are forgiven. Heaven is yours. Your Lord loves you. Even though you are a sinner, he has washed you away in the blood of Christ." You come back the next week and the message is, "You know what? God says he is sick of you all. He's tired of you disobeying him week after week even though he has loved you. So here is what is going on...you're all going to hell! Bye. See you next week." Do you really want a new and different message? Heavens no!

We face so many new and different things that challenge us, isn't it wonderful we have this one constant in our lives? Our God is faithful to us! Our God loves us and has taken away our sins. Our God has opened heaven to us and he knows what we are going through. Even when it doesn't feel like he knows, he knows. That's the truth of Scripture. That's the message that underpins our life as Christians. Its what gives us confidence to lift our head up off the pillow on the days when we just want to roll over and pull the covers over our heads and say, "Goodbye world. I don't want to face you today." That's the message that sustains us. Be faithful because God has already given you the victor's crown through Jesus Christ. Amen.