

Rev. 2 – Church of Smyrna

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If you would this evening, if you'll turn in your Bibles to the book of Revelation 2. Tonight we are studying the second of the seven churches that we find in Revelation 2 and 3. Tonight it's the church of Smyrna, the church which literally means "the red ones; those that have been martyred; those that have been persecuted." The church of Smyrna is very unique, much like the church at Philadelphia; it's one of only two churches the the Lord does not have any words of harshness for. There is nothing that is mentioned that they have done that is of ill nature. There are no shortcomings. There are no short fallings. In fact, the Lord commends them and says, "You see yourself even in a worst light than I do. You think that you're poor, whereas I think that you're rich." And tonight, what we're going to see in the life of this church of Smyrna is a very practical life lesson for us; what we're going to see very simply for us tonight is that if we are faithful in our faith, that faithfulness will produce fruit and ultimately that fruit will produce the opportunity for us to finish our faith well and I believe that every one of us here tonight, hopefully every one of us here tonight, wants to be like the Apostle Paul. On his deathbed he said, "I have finished my race. I have run the course and therein is laid up for me a crown of righteousness." I hope that is your desire tonight, what we're going to see from the church of Smyrna of how that can become a reality in our life.

Beginning in verse 8 of Revelation 2, it says,

8 And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write; These things saith the first and the last, which was dead, and is alive; 9 I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. 10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. 11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

It's a very short message to what is a congregation that we can gather is somewhat small in size. Are they small in size because they're not faithful? Absolutely not. Are they small in size because they're not true to the word of God? Of course not. They're small in size because what we see is that those that are not there for the right motivation and/or

reasons have somehow/some way been weeded out. When it says that the devil is casting them into prison for their faithfulness to the faith, we discover, as we're going to see in a moment, that oftentimes persecution has an interesting way of weeding out those that are just pretending, acting, or not there for the proper reasons and/or motives. So the first thing we see from the church of Smyrna that I hope will be an encouragement to us, is that they were faithful to their Lord.

Now, I have placed on your outline tonight what I call the typical marks of a true believer. When I use the phrase "typical marks" you'll notice that I put it in quotation marks because unfortunately today the typical believer in Jesus Christ is not a biblically based believer, but more a worldly based believer, however, as the great pastor of days gone by in China, Watchman Nee said, "The normal Christian life is not very normal." What should be normal and what should be typical based on what the Bible challenges us to be is oftentimes unfortunately a rarity, an oddity, and an endangered species and what we see in the church of Smyrna is that there were certain characteristics, there were certain qualities that they expressed that should be the expressions of our faith as well.

Notice the four things the Lord describes. The first one says: I know your works. I know the things that you are doing. I know what's happening in your life. I know the natural expressions. I'm reminded as I placed on your outline, John 5:19, Jesus is being challenged by the things that he's doing, the things that he is saying, and one of the things that Jesus says is, he says he did not do anything of his own but only what the Father showed him to do. Why is this significant? Because the first typical mark of a believer is that our actions, our words, our mannerisms ought to be a natural manifestation of whose we are. In other words, our identity, our name, whose we are, ought to naturally flow out of us. It should not be "fight" to become or to be who we claim to be. In fact, I would argue that those who are fighting or struggling and wrestling with things oftentimes you might have to take a step back and say, "Who is their true identity? Who is their true spiritual father?" Jesus addressed this in John 8. The Pharisees who were religious, the Pharisees who gave of their money, the Pharisees who served in all capacities, Jesus said their father was the devil himself. Why? Because the fruit is a natural extension of the root. A born again believer in Jesus Christ ought to act like his heavenly Father, ought to talk like his heavenly Father, and ought to think like his heavenly Father. Why? Because he is the root by which our lives should bear the fruit and here at the church of Smyrna, he says, "I appreciate the works that you're doing."

Now, there's a second aspect or a second mark, it says that they experienced tribulation. Now, don't think Matthew 24 or Revelation 6 through 19 tribulation, think in terms of difficulties and struggles in life. You see, this is the second mark of a true Bible believing Christian, not only will they look like the things of God...by the way, you do know that the term "Christian" that was given to us in Acts 11 was not given to us by ourselves but by the world at large; it was the pagans and the heathens that called us Christians because they said, "You look and act just like Jesus." But the tribulation that is spoken of here when the Smyrnaeans say, "But we have tribulation and we're struggling here," this is a natural byproduct. A natural byproduct. A Bible believing Christian is not going to be beloved by a carnal, pagan world. It is not going to happen.

In fact, Luke 4 is the story of Jesus' first sermon. Now, think about this, Jesus, we go back in the Gospels, at age 12, you remember that he was in the temple and we know that famous story that on the way back home to Nazareth he was not with the crowd of his family and his earthly parents had to go back and find him. But the Bible says that he marveled the leaders; he marveled the doctors of the law. It's quite possible that the Gamaliels of Acts 5 were there; quite possibly the Nicodemuses of John 3 were there; some of the leaders of the community just marveled at his wisdom and his knowledge and his understanding. So fast forward to age 30. Here he is a full grown and mature man by all standards of Jewish culture. He walks into the synagogue there in Luke 4. They hand him the scroll to read; it was a very common practice. However, he did not read the reading of the day that was scheduled. He turned to the book of Isaiah and he read that the Messiah would come; that he would set the captives free; he would heal those that are broken hearted; and he would bring deliverance and salvation. He rolled it back up and he said, "Behold, it is fulfilled in your eyes today." He was speaking of himself.

The synagogue residents, the Pharisees and the leaders, were so impressed by his knowledge at age 30 that they tried to drive him off a cliff. They literally took him to the edge of town and according to the Gospel of Luke, they tried to push him off a cliff. One of my favorite passages in all the Bible, it says that Jesus escaped in the midst of them. How did he escape? I don't have a clue. I don't know. Did he just suspend time and everybody was like...I don't know. Was he kind of like a middle weight wrestler and he went between their legs? I don't know. I know he didn't just vanish and reappear because he wasn't in his glorified body yet. I know that for a fact, but the Bible said that they attempted to push him off the cliff. Why is that important? Because if Jesus Christ, God in flesh, gets up in public and just declares who he is and they don't like it, then why would the world like it when we say whose we are? It is a natural typical mark of a Bible believing Christian.

So there is works, there's tribulation, then there, and I put it in quotes, "poverty." The reason I put it in quotes is simply this: a lack of money is not a sign of holiness, nor is an abundance of money a sign of carnality. Some of the godliest people in your Bible happen to have a lot of wealth attached to their name: the Abrahams of the world, the Davids of the world, the Solomons of the world. Shall we say that those who addressed the body of Jesus coming off the cross were very wealthy; the tomb in which he was laid was from a wealthy man and we could say he was godly and holy. But notice there in Matthew 8, Jesus makes this statement about himself, he says the foxes at least have a hole or a place to put their head at night and the Son of Man does not.

Now, the reason that I put it in quotations is this: there is no guarantee as a believer in Jesus Christ that we will either be poor or rich or somewhere in between but I can promise you this, that a lost, pagan, heathen world does not want to do you any favors; does not want to offer you any abundances, so to speak. And so I'm reminded of Proverbs 30, a very simple verse in verse 9 where the Lord says, "Don't give me so much that I get greedy, don't give me so little that I steal, give me just what I need." And the picture that you get of Jesus is that he had just what he needed. Let me remind you that it

was the one who kept the moneybag that got in the biggest trouble, his name was Judas of Iscariot and every time he's mentioned in a negative light in Scripture, the Bible makes it very clear that he was the one that held the moneybag.

So when we talk about a Bible believing, a typical believer, our works should naturally look like the things of God, there are going to be tough times and tribulations, there are going to be those who come against us, we cannot necessarily expect the lavishing of the world, and finally, we're going to experience some slander. Here's what that means: just like those in Smyrna, people are going to say some things about you that aren't true; they're going to say some things that are ugly. I've joked with people but if I had a nickel for everything that somebody has said about me that wasn't true, I could pay off the national debt. Why? Because the world does not like Bible believing Christians as a whole. If they pushed Jesus off the cliff and they killed all but one of the apostles, don't you think they'll have the same attitude toward you as well?

So here we have the church of Smyrna, what was their response? "Oh, but God, we're so poor. Oh, we're small in number. We're not doing this thing right." What does God say? "You're doing it absolutely right." In fact, what we might question is when a "group of believers, a believer or a church," is experiencing the opposite of this; when they are receiving accolades of the world; when the money is flowing and the world just can't say enough good about them. When all they want to do is talk about them and buy their books, we might have to wonder which one is the authentic expression of biblical Christianity. Smyrna said, "Oh God, we must be doing something wrong. We're getting beat up. They're saying ugly things about us. We barely have enough money to buy food." Not one negative thing at all said about this group of believers.

You do understand that in a nutshell what I've just shared with you about the church at Smyrna goes completely against almost everything that you will buy at a Walmart in the Christian section, correct? We live in a world today and we're going to talk a little bit more about this in a moment, that tells us that unless we are popular and prosperous we must not be doing it God's way. If that's the case, then Jesus struggled because last time I checked, he said he didn't have a place to lay his head and a lot of people came against him because when he went to the cross, there were five people that were on his side and tens of thousands that said, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

So that's what we see tonight, just the faithfulness of this church at Smyrna. They thought they weren't doing it right but God said, "Oh, yes you are." Now, faithfulness always produces fruit. As I mentioned, the root always produces the fruit, the fruit is the natural expression of the root. One of the things that is interesting in this passage is in verse 9 when the Lord says, "I know your works, your tribulation and poverty, but thou art rich." The Lord makes a statement to them that the fruit that they're actually producing is valuable fruit; it's worthwhile fruit. I put on your outline 1 John 2:15-17. It basically says that we should not desire or lust after the things of the world and it gives us three categories: the lust of the flesh; the lust of the eyes; and the pride of life. It says that those are not to have any part in our lives. And oftentimes people take those three categories, they go back into Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve first introduced sin to the human race,

remember that they said that it was good for food, it was pleasant to the eyes, it would make them wise like the gods? Once again, those three categories: the lust of the flesh; the lust of the eyes; and the pride of life. What's interesting is that the world teaches us that we should get what we can see, experience what we can feel, and get all that we can get and what does the Bible say? Oh, no, no, that's not necessarily the godly way or the biblical way of doing things. They thought they were poor. God said, "You are rich because you have not succumbed to the temptations of these various lusts and these various concepts."

Now, one of the things that I want to share with you tonight is the deceitfulness of riches because here is a church, here is a group of people who don't have a whole lot in their bank account; they don't have a whole lot of popularity in their community. They feel as if they've been discarded. They feel as if they've been marginalized. They feel as if they're not making any difference in the world in which they're living. Does this sound like your life on occasion? Listen, there is a deceitfulness to riches.

Both in the Gospel of Mark and Matthew, Jesus tells the parable of the sower. I'm sure you're very familiar with it. He says that the sower goes out to sow and when he sows, he sows the word of God. You remember the four categories or the four types of people that the seed falls upon. The first one, it says that when it hit the hard ground and, by the way, I'm going to say the expression of as well as the interpretation that Jesus gave. It falls on the hard ground and what happened? The fowls of the air, in fact, Jesus said Satan comes and scoops it up. It never even plants. It never blossoms. Satan literally steals the seed out of the heart of that individual. The second one says that it springs up in rocky ground and it grows up real fast, but when the sun comes, it scorches it because it has no root. The third one is doing fine until something happens. According to the Bible, the third seed is growing and doing well until it becomes unfruitful and the Bible says it becomes unfruitful because of the deceitfulness of riches, the cares of this world, and the lust of other things. Then there's the fourth seed, the Bible says it finds good ground and then when it grows it produces some thirty, some sixty and a hundredfold.

Of those four seeds, we could do an entire sermon series just on all four seeds, but the first one is pretty simple. We understand and we know people who hear the message of Jesus Christ, who hear the message of God's word, and they absolutely don't want to have a thing to do with it. Somehow, some way, the devil has planted a thought, an idea or a concept in their mind and they just say, "I don't want any of that." We've known those people. We've seen them. We've also seen the second type who hear the truths of God's word, they get really excited about it and all of a sudden there's all this passion and fervor but you look up and there's not foundation. There is nothing solid. In fact, it's a picture of 1 John 2 that says, "those that left us were never, ever a part of us." What did Jesus say? There wasn't any root.

Hopefully, we know those that have been on good ground: thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. That's the church of Smyrna. The church of Smyrna is the good ground. They're producing the thirty, the sixty, the hundredfold. In fact, I had an old football coach that when we were doing two-a-days and we'd be sweating and we'd have cuts and we'd have

blood and we'd be griping and whining and moaning, he used to say this, "Blood makes the grass grow." What he meant was if you want a better looking field, then we've got to press on through what we're doing. There is an old statement that the church of Jesus Christ is built upon the blood of its martyrs. The good ground: thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

But it's that third seed that is so gut wrenching to me. Why? Because I think there's biblical evidence that, to use the vernacular of Scripture, they're saved, they're born again, they're a Christian, they're just as much going to be a resident of heaven as you or I but if it becomes unfruitful, then it had to be what? Fruitful. That there was a time in its life that it had fervor. There was a time in its life when it had passion. There was a time in its life when it stood on its convictions and weathered the storm of the culture. But what happened? The deceitfulness of riches. The promise that we can gain the world. But what did Jesus say in Mark 8? "He who gains the world will lose his soul." He who loses his soul and not gain the world. You see, what we see is the deceitfulness of riches.

How about this one? The cares of the world. You know, the cares of the world mean things that aren't necessarily sinful or evil or bad, they just get so much a part of our lives they consume our lives. You know, Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, he said, "Seek first the kingdom of God." What that means is sometimes you can put something that is good in God's place and when you put something that's good in God's place, you have your priorities messed up. You see, oftentimes we think, "Well, at least I'm not sinning. I'm not in debauchery. I'm not in this, I'm not in that." But you realize and I know I may be stepping on some toes here, God instituted the family before he did the church. That means our home and our relationship with each other in our home and their relationship to God is of more critical nature than even our relationship to each other in this context of this congregation. So oftentimes we relegate the important things to the bottom of the list and the least important things to the top of the list. There is nothing wrong with being successful at our jobs. There is nothing wrong with having an enjoyable hobby. There is nothing wrong with having friendships. There is nothing wrong but when they take the priority over the things of God, then by strict definition they actually become an idol in our lives because they have surpassed the importance of the things and even the value of God in our lives.

This is why I love what Larry Burkett, the Director of what we know as Crown Financial Ministries, one of the lines he's very famous for, he said, "I can tell a man's priority by simply," and this is an antiquated statement, you'll see what I mean in a minute, "by looking at his checkbook. When I see where the money goes first, I know what the priority in their lives are." Now, that's a very simple example of a man who is very gifted in godly wisdom when it comes to finances, but let me take that same analogy and say it's not just the finances we have, it's also the time that we allocate, the energy that we allocate, the emphasis that we allocate. Do you know how easy it is to have God be second saddle in your life? Now, for those of you who don't speak Texan, let me unpack that for you: second saddle means not first priority. It's easy. Do you know why? "Well, God, I have 50 priorities in my life, at least you're number 2." What did he say in Matthew 6:33? He wants to be number 1.

And I will share with you particularly as a young person, even as an adult, this is a struggle. It's a struggle because there are so many things that come into our life that are important and they're valuable. There is nothing wrong with a young person getting a good education but there's no reason to put our education above our relationship with God. There is nothing wrong as an adult of having a wonderful secure job, but our occupation should never come above our God. We should have a wonderful family, should we not? But do you know that our families should not even come before our relationship with God? It's really simple: God comes first, our family comes second. Everything else should fall somewhere in suit therein. The church at Smyrna didn't get it messed up. They got it right.

But notice they're response, "Oh God, we must be doing something wrong?" Why? I've got this funny feeling that it wasn't all the pagans and the heathens that made them think they were doing it wrong, I think it was all the churches around the corner that were having the worldly success that they weren't experiencing and saying, "Why do they seem to be doing to good and we seem to be struggling so much?" And God said, "Because you have it right." In fact, this is the only one of the seven churches where he says, "You will receive a crown, a reward," we'll talk about that in just a moment, "for the things you're doing."

But there are two schemes that I want to address tonight in lights of the parable of the sower, in light of the church of Smyrna, that I call Satan's great tactics. These are the things that he has tried and true on humanity from Adam and Eve all the way to you and me. Here's the first scheme: if Satan wants to get you off track, the first thing he tries is persecution. That's the first thing he tries. He wants to make your life difficult. He wants to make your popularity wane. He wants to make it that you're not as well loved that you used to be before you knew Jesus. Persecution is always his first tactic. Notice the church at Smyrna, what was in their life? Persecution. What was happening? The people were going against them. Understand that when persecution comes in our lives, you've heard the old illustration, it's like a bag of tea, right? We don't know how strong it is until we put it in hot water. And so what often happens is persecution comes and the third seed shows up, it becomes unfruitful. Why? Because the deceitfulness of riches, the cares of this world, the lusts of other things.

What we see in the church of Smyrna here in Revelation 2 is they didn't fall for this scheme. They stayed tried, they stayed true, but the devil's first scheme is always persecution. If he cannot get us on persecution, church, he will get us on prosperity. That's his second scheme. What we see here in these seven churches is the church of Pergamos. The church of Pergamos is a debacle at best. We'll study that in the weeks ahead, but what we see there is that the devil gave them prosperity; the devil gave them abundances and riches and it messed everything up.

Let me share with you the truth of history whether it's you as an individual, your family, or even a local church, the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ, though maybe not numerically, always grows and strengthens under persecution and always falls apart in

days of prosperity. Almost every single time. So what does the devil do? He puts the pressure on us and if we don't give up, give in or give out, what does he do? He prospers us. Do you want a good secular example? Watch these guys that win the lottery. How are they doing two and three years later? Individuals that were struggling at best. In fact, I love this thing that Dave Ramsay says about the lottery, "The lottery is a tax on poor and stupid people." Why? Because they think spending \$20 today will give them millions tomorrow. Those individuals who scrape their last dollar to buy that ticket who got millions and sometimes billions of dollars, it seems like, have you read their stories? Their lives ended up worse in the end than they ever were in the beginning. We're not real good at handling prosperity.

But what does the devil use? What are his schemes? Two things: he'll persecute you and if that doesn't work, I'll prosper you. And you can look throughout time and history, the church of Jesus Christ in local and in corporate situations, has become unfruitful at the hands of one of those two items almost every single time. What does Proverbs 30:9 say? "Don't give me so much that I get greedy and so little that I steal." What did Jesus tell us to pray in what we know as the Lord's Prayer, it's really the disciples' prayer? "Give us this day our daily bread." What we see in the church of Smyrna, the Lord said, "But thou art rich."

Then he continues to tell them, he says, "Fear none of these things that you should suffer. Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison that you are tried; you shall have tribulation ten days: be faithful unto death, and he will give you a crown of life." Interesting, he says, "You'll be cast into prison for ten days." Now, the prison system, the penitentiary system in ancient Rome was very different than our culture today. Can you imagine this happening in the United States of America today, from the point in which they book you and put you in a cell, if your case has not been dealt with in ten days, your head is taken off of you? You talk about, you know, in our founding documents it says we have the right to a speedy trial, I mean, that is really speedy there, ten days.

What does he says? "Some of you will be cast into prison ten days." Let me share with you the importance of that statement. I want you to imagine that you're a resident of Smyrna. I want you to imagine, by the way, this isn't hard in our culture today, I want you to imagine that you have been castigated, that you have been eliminated from your job, you've been removed from your home, you've been told you can no longer function in society because you will not renounce the truth of God's word and the person of Jesus Christ. That used to be hard to imagine in this culture, it's not today, is it? Now I want you to imagine yourself in Smyrna, that you've been booked on charges of being a Christian, faithful to the things of God. The first night in jail, I would kind of be like Paul and Barnabas, I'd be singing and having a good time. You know, it's good at times to suffer for the Lord, it let's you know you're on the right path, right? Day two wouldn't be too bad. But can I be honest with you? By the time I got to about day seven, I'd be a little nervous. Why? Because you're down to 72 hours, "Is my head going to roll off my body or is God going to deliver me?"

Notice what he says, "Some of you will suffer ten days." I know there is one in this room that has a statement that I love, there is an individual here in our congregation that says, "God is the God of the two-minute warning." Now, for those of you that are football fans, let me explain that: how many games have been won and lost in the last 120 seconds of a football game? Here you play 60 minutes if it's pro, you play all these minutes, the first 58 minutes, everybody is ebbing and flowing but it's the last two minutes that make all the difference, all the difference in the world. How many Hall of Fame quarterbacks are known for their game winning drives? They pull the game out at the last very moment.

The thing that I love about this passage, "some of you will be there ten days," let me give you a phrase. If you've never heard it, you need to memorize this: God is rarely early and he's never late. But how many of us, the dawn of day ten, day ten, the sun has come up, the deadline is midnight, there are 18 hours and either our heads roll or the doors open up, how many of us would question God's faithfulness? How many of us would say, "God, do you really know what you're doing?" How many people in your life and in your sphere of influence have you seen the doctor's have said, "There is no hope," and the Lord came in on the tenth day? How many times have those who know the financial world said, "Your situation, there is no hope," and God delivered on the tenth day? You see, I think one of the struggles that we have personally is that we give God about 7 ½ days and we say, "Whoa, you can't do this." And I hate to make this equation because the character of the individuals involved are so tainted at times, but look at the men who are the most winning quarterbacks in the NFL, look at the men who are in the Hall of Fame, look at the men who go to the Pro Bowl every year, why are they so well known? Because when there is 35 seconds left in the game and their team is down by six, they still have a chance. Guess what, folks? When it's 11:39 p.m. and the clock says there's 21 minutes left, we still have more than enough chance with God.

Let me give you some perspective. The Lord said when tribulation comes ten days, that's three days longer than it took to create the universe. Think about that for a moment. In fact, that's one of the statements that I've used with people when people come to me and say, "I don't know if God can do this." I say, "Well, how much time do we have?" "We've got 90 days." I say, "Well, if he created the universe in six and rested on the seventh, then he's got time to do this multiple times." And what we see when he said ten days, I think the message we can see is that oftentimes God's deliverance, God's bringing us through the fires of tribulation doesn't come on day one, sometimes it doesn't come on day five, it often comes when we think he may not deliver us but he does. And when he told the residents of Smyrna, "You will be cast into prison ten days," I believe what he was sharing with them is, "Don't give up. Don't give in." Philippians 1:6, "He who began a good work in you will perform it unto the day of Christ Jesus."

He says, "You are rich. You are faithful. You are fruitful." So what does that fruitfulness produce? It produces, in my opinion, a very interesting thing. Here in verse 10, he says, "If you are faithful unto death, don't worry, I will give you a crown of life." Now, the Bible speaks very specifically of five rewards that a believer in Jesus Christ has the opportunity to attain in what we know as the judgment seat of Christ. You say, "Pastor, what's the judgment seat of Christ?" Well, 1 Corinthians 3 says there is no foundation, by

the way, this begins in verse 10 and 11, it says, "There is no foundation whereby men must lay but that which is Christ Jesus." Remember he taught us that in Matthew 7. He said, "but we build upon that foundation gold and silver and jewels, wood, hay and stubble but the day comes where it will be tried by fire," but listen to verse 15, "yet you shall be saved from the fire." Then you go over to Romans 14:10, it says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of that which we have done in the flesh whether it be good or bad." 2 Corinthians 10:5 says the same thing. In other words, one who has committed their life to Christ, believed upon Christ, is one that is going to have to stand face to face with Christ and give an account of their life in Christ. Now, let me share with you when I was a 13 year old young man, this concept was first introduced to me and I struggled with it. It bothered me. I was just...I was ripped apart from the inside. But when we conclude the message tonight, you're going to see that rather than having a frown on our face it can produce a smile on our face.

So what are these five rewards? Well, not necessarily in chronological order but just as they're listed, here what we have in Revelation 2 oftentimes is called the martyr's crown; that when we allow ourselves to be put in a position whereas we saw in the movie last Sunday evening that we would rather stand with God and be condemned by the world than stand with the world and be condemned by God. Now, that martyrdom, don't think necessarily the loss of one's physical life. Martyrdom can be the loss of one's financial wherewithal. It can be the loss of one's status. It can be the loss of one's popularity. When you say no to what the world offers so you can say yes to the truthfulness of Jesus Christ in his word, I believe it categorizes itself under what we call the martyr's crown, it says there's a reward. When we choose the Lord over the world, one day when we stand before him, I think that's categorized as gold, silver and precious jewels.

There's a second one in 1 Corinthians 9. In fact, tonight I'm going to ask you, if you don't mind, just turning in these passages with me. 1 Corinthians 9 there is an allusion to the act of running or the sport of even track and field. Now as we turn to 1 Corinthians 9, several years ago I had somebody approach me and they were very cordial to me but they just said, "Pastor, be honest, I really struggle with your style of preaching." I said, "That's fine. What is it about it?" They said, "Well, all you do is talk about sports. Sports analogies about this and sports analogies about that. I don't like all those sports analogies." I said, "Well, you obviously don't enjoy the New Testament." They said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, there's illustrations of track and field, there's illustration of wrestling, boxing." I said, "There's all kinds of sports illustrations in the Bible." Okay, that's my little soapbox for the night.

Beginning in verse 25 of 1 Corinthians 9, "And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown," this is speaking of an athletic event, "but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air," two sports in one verse, by the way, "But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." Oftentimes we call this the incorruptible crown. In other words, when we stay the course, when we make the decision that we know is God's decision for our life and not the world's decision for our life. It is not to the extreme

of what we would call martyrdom of the loss of status or finances or even one's life, but it says when we beat ourselves into subjection, it literally means that we oftentimes go without the pleasures of this world so as to have the smile of God upon our lives. We run for a crown that is incorruptible, not corruptible.

How many times have the awards that we sought so after in life just become dusty relics in an attic or a cardboard box? I've had the privilege in my life, through athletic endeavors and other such items, I've had the privilege of winning a lot of awards. And every now and then one of my sons will come up to me when we're talking about something and they'll say, "Dad, where are all those trophies?" Do you know what my answer is? "I don't know." I literally don't know. I don't know where they are. Why? Because they're corruptible. They rise and they fall.

My favorite illustration from my own life, when I was a senior in high school, I was very blessed my senior year. I received an award that the teachers and the faculty gave out at our high school. It was a very special award at the end of the year that they recognized a boy and a girl, a male and a female, for this such award and the prestige of it was you didn't get a trophy, you didn't get a plaque, but there was a large plaque that was there in the main office that had your name on it. Now, we've seen these plaques, right? They go all the way back years and years and years with the winner of this year and that year and my name was inscribed. Well, my sophomore year in college, I had been out of high school about 18 months, it was during the Christmas break, college was out, high school was still in and I needed something involving my transcript because I was changing my major because that's what college students do three, four, five times in their lifetime. I needed a transcript so in those days you didn't have the online access like we do today so I had to go up to the main office. I went up to the main desk. They said, "How may we help you?" I said, "My name is Jeff Meyers and I need to get my transcript X number of years." This young lady said, "I'm sorry, but who are you again?" I said, "My name is Jeff Meyers." She goes, "Have you been a student here before? When did you graduate?" She kept going on. I said, "Ma'am, that's my name right there!" "Oh, I'm sorry. I guess you were a student here." Eighteen months earlier, the faculty gave me an award, the lady working the desk didn't have a clue who I was. 1 Corinthians 9, the race of the world is corruptible. It corrodes. It fades away. Ah, but when we beat ourselves into subjection, when we don't embrace the things of the world but we do embrace the things of God, it is a crown that is incorruptible.

Now, fast forward to 2 Timothy 4. The reason I want you to turn to these pages is I want you to actually see in writing these five specific rewards, these crowns that the Lord speaks of. Here we are in basically the last will and testament of who we know as the Apostle Paul. Chronologically speaking, this is the last that we have of him, a very famous chapter where it talks about those who desire itching ears; those who want false teachers. But beginning in verse 5, he says, "But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not

to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." The Bible says there is actual reward, what it says in 1 Corinthians 3 of that gold and silver and jewels, that if we look more forward to him coming for us than what the world offers us tomorrow.

You know, when we talk about the second coming of Jesus, I know oftentimes we whoop and we holler and we amen and we shout but how many of us down deep would say, "Yeah, but I hope he comes after my vacation"? Or how about this one, "I sure would love to see my grandchild born first." Or "I want my kids to graduate, then he can come." This morning I caught myself getting a little verbal. Brother Ernie was up here praying our benediction this morning and in his prayer he made the statement, "Lord, you could come back this afternoon," and I caught myself saying, "Amen" out loud. Why? Because as a believer in Jesus Christ, we ought to want him to come for us before we experience anything else whether it's our children, our grandchildren, opportunities or even rest and relaxation. I've got news for you: when you're in heaven one day, it's better than any vacation you've ever booked. I promise.

He says, "I love his appearing." Do you know that the book of Acts, it records that the Apostle Paul was stoned and left for dead three times? Now, I've always wondered about how that went when the guys dragged him out of town. Maybe you've never thought about this but Paul is left for dead, right? So he can't move. He's unconscious. They think he's dead. The apostles, the Bible says they take and they literally drag his body out and they nurse him back to health. Have you ever wondered what Paul said to them when he woke up? Have you ever thought maybe he said, "What are y'all doing? Why? Why would you nurse me back to health?" Let me give you a little insight in the Meyers family. My wife and I, we have a will, we have a medical power of attorney and all those legal things and I don't mind sharing with you that both of us have agreed after 20 years of marriage that if either one of us is in the position, we want the other to pull the proverbial plug. My wife has always said, "Honey, just let me go see Jesus." Do you know what Tracey has said to me? I can't make this stuff up. She said, "If I'm in that position where I can go see Jesus and you make sure that I don't, when I come back I will kill you." Why did I use that illustration? And she didn't literally mean it, I hope. Because I know she loves his appearing. The very last verse of your Bible says, "Even so, come Lord Jesus." Do you know what the Apostle Paul said? He said those who experience what we know as that rapture event, they win a prize. They never have to experience death. They got to see the Lord before they even experience what we know as physical death.

Moving on to 1 Peter 5. I believe this is one of the most misunderstood of the rewards. 1 Peter 5. Many people have called this the pastor's crown or the shepherd's crown. I'm going to read this passage to you or with you and then I want to share with you what I believe it's really saying. Beginning in verse 1, it says, "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth

not away." Now, oftentimes that's been called the pastor's prayer because of the context of a local church and making sure those that are called to a specific task are actually faithful in that task, but the word "shepherd" is used, correct? By strict definition, a shepherd is one who assists and helps and takes care of those that are under their tutelage. I don't think this is limited to local church pastors for last time I checked, moms and dads and grandmas and granddads, do you not shepherd your family? Those that, in my personal opinion, have the calling on their life to be in an educational format in teaching and instructing, are you not shepherding those students of yours? I would even say those in the business world who have employees that are under their authority, are they not shepherding them? And this crown is given, those that are under your influence, those who you have the opportunity to instill the truth of God's word in their lives, did you take advantage of the opportunity or did you just go on down the road? What we see here whether it is looking for the appearing of Christ, how we work in our business and our school life, it's really simple: it's putting the things of God first and foremost in our life and everything else beginning in the second place.

And last but not least, 1 Thessalonians 2:19. It's speaking of those who have come to know Jesus as their Savior under the ministry, not only of the church of Thessalonica, but the ministry of Paul and the apostles. Many people call this the evangelism or the evangelistic or the evangelist's crown. Verse 19 of 1 Thessalonians 2, "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming?" And the idea, the concept is there is a crown given; there is a reward given; there is as 1 Corinthians 3 says, the gold, the silver and the jewels given to those who make known their faith to others so that when that eventual culmination comes in Christ in all things, there are those that are there because you opened your mouth and you shared with them the truth of Jesus Christ.

Now, let me share with you a very hard, awful truth this evening: there are some people who take what we've just talked about with these five crowns and completely misconstrue everything. The last time I checked, nowhere in the Bible does it declare that our goal in life is to be a crown collector. In fact, I would say if we do any of these things for the sake of the reward of the things, we shall not receive the reward of the thing of what we did. In fact, you see in all these that it is just the living for God first, others second, and yourself last that produces the reward. In fact, if you'll turn in Revelation, which we're studying, over to chapter 3, I want to share with you something very intriguing about these rewards. Now, a reward is very different than a relationship. I have a relationship with Jesus Christ built on his blood that he shed for me. The rewards, for lack of better terms, are the icing on the cake. According to 1 Corinthians 3, the rewards are what I build on top of the foundation which is Jesus Christ.

Now, as we find ourselves in Revelation 3:11, it says, "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which you have, that no man take your crown." In other words, crowns and rewards, according to Scripture, quite possibly they're temporary. In other words, you say, "Well, I used to make every decision for Jesus. Man, I bet I've got a ton of crowns laid up." Well, if it's been 30 years since you've done that, I doubt you do. You say, "Well, I used to talk about Jesus all the time. I used to do this. I used to..." By the way, you never want to find

yourself as a "used to" Christian, right? "I used to do this. I used to be a part of that. I used to be involved in this." And so the picture that we get is even though they are rewards for our faithfulness, it's just like back to the third seed of the sower: it became unfruitful. And I believe there is scriptural evidence that even though we may receive a reward for our faithfulness today, our lack of faithfulness tomorrow cannot void our relationship but it could feasibly void our reward.

But it's the last concept here under the temporariness of these rewards that I want to address. I want to go back to when I was 13 years of age. I was on a youth retreat. At the time, there was a friend of mine, a youth pastor, who had come in to lead a bunch of derelict teenagers for an entire weekend trying to instill the Bible into our lives. I thought he was an old man because he was about 29 or 30. Now looking back, he was just a young guy. But this guy would come in and he was teaching on this concept. I didn't receive it real well. You see, I don't know why but I've got this complex in my life, I tend to over-think things. Now, sometimes you can under-think things but I tend to over-analyze things and I remember one night the way that the retreat center was set up, I happened to be in a room that was adjacent to him and when I've got something on the mind, I'm going to talk about it and so he was young enough to stay up late and we were talking and hammering all these things out. Here was my rationale, work with me for a moment. I told him, I said, "I just can't go where you're going here in Scripture about this whole reward thing. Some people may have five, some people may have three, some people 2 ½. I just don't get it." He said, "Well, why not? It's just laid out in Scripture." And here was my analogy as what I consider a very wise 13 year old, I said, "Let's just say that when we get to heaven, that the mansions are not organized according to alphabetical order and my mansion," this was the illustration I gave, "is next to Billy Graham's. He's going to have a lot more crowns than I am therefore in eternity, I will covet and be jealous and I will sin and that can't happen in heaven." He looked at me and I could see it in his eyes, "You're definitely over-analyzing this situation." He showed me a verse that is so liberating. I want you to go to Revelation 4 and we'll study this in detail in a few weeks but I want you to see the purpose of decisions that we make for Christ.

Why do we share the Gospel with other people? Why do we say no to the things of the world? Why do we beat ourselves into subjection? Why do we get excited about his coming? Why would we do these things? So we can have a bunch of crowns? A bunch of trophies on our eternal shelf in our mansion? I'm going to pick up in verse 9 of chapter 4 of Revelation. It says, "And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that lives for ever and ever," listen to this passage, "they cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." Let me go back to my analogy. When we've been there 10,000 years, bright, shining as the sun, Billy Graham will have no more crowns than any of us and you will have no less than anybody else. In fact, the way that I read the last two chapters of the Bible, you and I spend eternity crownless. But according to Revelation 4, there is going to be a day where we appear before the judgment seat of Christ, there is going to be a day where we're gathered around the throne room and we

have one more opportunity to take the rewards he's given to us and we give them back to him. Let me give you a very practical analysis that happens every time at least you attend this church: we take up an offering, right? We give of our tithes and offerings. The resources we give, do they not originate with him? Are they not his? And are we not giving them back to him? Do you see the picture that we have? We are but stewards of this life and we are not to live it so that we can attain more but that – listen – so we can give more.

I want to close with this thought: one day as a believer in Jesus Christ like the church at Smyrna, like the individuals there, you will find yourself around the glassy sea; one day you're going to be before the throne of God. Let me ask you a very rhetorical powerful question: do you want to show up on that day and say, "This is all I did for you"? Or do you want to walk in with the biggest sack that you've ever seen of rewards and crowns and jewels and say, "Jesus, since you went to the cross for me, this is how I responded to you"? You see, both parties spend eternity crownless but I don't know about you, but when it comes...and maybe this is just because I'm getting older. Young people, you'll understand this one day. Christmas isn't what it used to be to me. Christmas used to be about what did I get. Now Christmas is becoming what can I give. You know, Jesus was right, he said it is more blessed to give than receive. I think I'm finally hitting the maturity level where I get that. I actually enjoy now giving more than getting. And the same thing goes for that time when we present ourselves to the Lord. It's not so that we can get these rewards, but that one last time we have the privilege of giving them back to him. If we do these things so as to get, I don't think we'll have much to give. If we do them so that we can give more, I think there will be a lot to offer.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we close this study tonight, oh what a privilege it is to know that one day we will stand before your throne, one day we will bow down before your throne, and one day we will cast our crowns before your throne. Lord, for myself, for my family, for this church body, Lord, I pray that when that day comes, we don't arrive giftless, we don't arrive presentless but, Lord, we have to bring an entire trailer of our life behind us to give to you back what you have given to us. Lord, every day of our lives, you give us the chance to open our mouths. Every day of our lives, you give us the chance to say no to the world and yes to you. Every day of our lives, you give us the privilege to desire your coming. Lord, I just simply pray that if not yet up to this point, we would take advantage of every day and living it completely for you. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.