

# Jesus and His Church (3): Smyrna

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(Revelation 2:8-12)

## I. Introduction

- A. Sometimes everything is not what it seems... according to FedEx anyway
  - 1. FedEx Ground is fast even if “ground” doesn’t sound fast ([play video](#))
  - 2. Some things are exactly what they seem (Harry, Eileen, Joy and Bob)
  - 3. Some things are not what they seem—so FedEx Ground is really fast!
- B. That is true when you look around at church this morning, isn’t it
  - 1. We see freshly-scrubbed, smiling faces; things seem to be just perfect
    - a. Everyone is “*great*” or “*good*” or at least “*fine*”... at worst, we’re “*OK*”
    - b. At church, “*OK*” is code word, isn’t it “*You’re OK? Oh, what’s wrong?*”
  - 2. Something aren’t what they seem; faces aren’t smiling behind closed doors
    - a. Relationships that seem strong outside are on the verge of collapse.
    - b. Families struggle with substance abuse, domestic violence and infidelity
    - c. We have issues— health issues, job issues, family issues, issue issues
  - 3. But then we come together at church, everything seems to be just fine.
    - a. Like Sunday clothes, we put our church persona and everything is fine.
      - 1) God didn’t put us in church for worship/study (*can do that at home*)
      - 2) He put here to have a place to serve... and to be served ([Gal 6:2](#))  
*Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*
    - b. Church is a “**safe house**” where hurting people come to find relief.
      - 1) Why do we often keep our struggles hidden from church friends?
      - 2) Pressure to be fine? See church as unsafe for people who aren’t fine?
    - c. We need like Harry, Eileen, Bob... free to be exactly like we seem
- C. We continue series on the 7 churches of Asia; today it’s Smyrna ([Rev 2:8-11](#))
  - 1. Our text today reminds us churches are not always what they seem to be.
    - a. We tend to look at external things to judge how a church is doing
    - b. We tend to count “*noses and nickels*” (our attendance and our giving)
    - c. Or we look at our busyness—the number of things going on at church
  - 2. But things aren’t always what they seem; Jesus sees the church differently

## II. Not Always As It Seems: Smyrna (Reading: [Revelation 2:8-10](#))

- A. Smyrna was located 35 miles north of Ephesus; it is the modern city of Izmir
1. Smyrna was a wealthy city, in many ways, the most splendid of the 7 cities
    - a. We don't know how the church came to be planted in Smyrna
    - b. Stott calls it "one of the most prosperous cities in Asia Minor." (p. 36)
    - c. Prosperity of the city is going to contrast with the struggle of the church
  2. Smyrna was not an easily place to build a church... or be a Christian.
    - a. Some of that came from the Jews, the persecutors of church in Acts
      - 1) The church was originally seen as Jewish sect—Jews opposed it
      - 2) That opposition was led by Saul, and then it followed him city to city
      - 3) Jesus refers to Jewish slander in Smyrna from "*synagogue of Satan*"
    - b. Revelation's persecution is Roman— the rise of emperor worship
      - 1) Seventy years earlier, Smyrna built a lavish temple to Tiberius.
      - 2) Smyrna was known for loyalty to Rome and ritual worship of Caesar
      - 3) Now Domitian demanded worship, and pressure in Smyrna was great
- B. Things are not always what they seem... but it seems that Smyrna is hurting
1. Jesus knows their "*poverty*" ([2:9](#)). Confiscation of property a first step
    - a. To understand the Nazi holocaust, you have to follow the money.
    - b. They got rich confiscating Jewish property. Same was true of Rome.
  2. It would not stop with property crimes, "*put some of you in prison*" ([2:10](#))
    - a. Believers would loose their property and freedom... for being believers!
    - b. Jesus says that they would "*suffer persecution for ten days*" ([2:10](#))
      - 1) Likely indicates a short but significant indeterminate length of time.
      - 2) Ten days doesn't seem that long... unless you are suffering horribly
  3. And what does, "*Be faithful even to the point of death*" mean? ([2:10](#))  
"*be faithful even if you have to die*" (NCV) "*remain faithful even when facing death*" (NLT)
    - a. Persecution would last 10 days, but that didn't mean they'd walk away.
    - b. For some, the 10 days would end only with their martyrdom
  4. Smyrna seemed to be hurting, but things aren't always as they seem ([9, 11](#))  
*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.*
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### III. Not Always What They Seem: Today

A. What do we see when we look at church? Things are not always as they seem.

1. What seems to suggest all is well at church may prove just the opposite!
  - a. **Harmony:** What looks like peace may be result of apathy & inactivity
  - b. **Doctrine:** A settled orthodoxy may be comfortable tradition (*Pharisee*)
  - c. **Missions:** We can focus on world missions while doing little at home!
  - d. **Ministry:** Church can be beehive of activity... that serves only itself.
2. Things aren't what they seem! What we see as weakness may be strength!
  - a. **Chaos:** Paul said, "*Decently and in order.*" Chaos can be God's order!
    - 1) Jerusalem was a chaotic and frenzied church... growth will do that!
    - 2) A church that stretches and challenges is never really very settled
    - 3) Sometimes chaos is a lack of planning; sometimes it is an act of God!
  - b. **Change:** Church that grapples with text and tradition can feel unsettled
    - 1) And old hymn equates, "*Change and decay*" They aren't the same!
    - 2) One lectureship theme, "*Has everything nailed down come loose?*"
      - a) Was Antioch nailed down or coming loose when including Gentiles?
      - b) Was Galatia nailed down when they rejected Jewish traditionalism?
    - 3) The church that had it all nailed down was Laodicea! (*Later lesson*)

B. Jesus tells small, struggling and suffering Smyrna, "... *Yet you are rich!*"

1. Looks can always be deceiving; things are not always what they seem.
  - a. There is nothing wrong with noses and nickels... we need more of each.
  - b. Sometimes dwindling numbers can indicate that something is wrong.
2. Real factors that determine faithfulness as a church are always **spiritual**.
  - a. Are people coming closer to God or merely attending gatherings?
  - b. Are lost ones people learning about Jesus or do we preach to the choir?
  - c. Are we pointing to Jesus or arguing over fine points of theology?
  - d. Are we involved in service or do we sit and be served... and complain?
  - e. Are we willing to stretch and grow or concerned with our comfort?
  - f. Are we being led to holiness or do we tolerate systems of the world?
3. Smyrna failed in the noses and nickels department—but they were strong

## IV. Conclusion

- A. There was a young man present when the letter to Smyrna was read first time
  1. There is a rather strong tradition that he studied under Apostle John
    - a. Years later, this young man would become a bishop at Smyrna.
    - b. He was the teacher of Ireneus, one of the early church fathers)
    - c. He wrote *Letter to the Philippians*, one of the earliest Christian writings
  2. At the age of 86, he would stand trial for his life before a Roman tribunal.
    - a. His name was Polycarp, the faithful martyr who was burned at the stake.
      - 1) Because of his age, he was given opportunity to recant/curse Christ.
      - 2) Tied to stake & with eyes to heaven, Polycarp gave his final answer  
*“Eighty and six years have I served Him, and never once did He wrong me.  
How can I now blaspheme my King who saved me?”*
    - b. Polycarp lived/died the essence of the faith Jesus spoke of in **Rev 2:10**—  
*Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.*
  3. Granted that precise understandings of the Book of Revelation are difficult.
    - a. There are four basic interpretive models and thousands of variations
    - b. But old Polycarp understood the book; his was an “Apocalyptic Faith”
    - c. The point for Polycarp is the point for us— *“faithful to point of death”*
- B. Faithful churches produce faithful Christians— just like Polycarp
  1. Or more to the point; faithful Christians produce faithful churches
    - a. Do you want Denbigh to be a healthy faithful church, inside and out?
    - b. Then you live faithfully for God each and every day, inside and out!
    - c. The secret to a healthy, faithful churches is living a healthy, faithful life
  2. Editorial in a British newspaper asked, *“What’s wrong with the world?”*
    - a. People came up with all kinds of theories/answers; many were printed
    - b. The best was from writer G. K. Chesterton—one we need to consider  
*Dear Editor, What is wrong with the world?” I am. Sincerely, G. K. Chesterton”*
  3. If we want to make the church better, the place to begin is with ourselves.