

Introduction: Every day matters most

Did you know that your associate pastor and I are a study in contrasts? Tall and thin; not tall, not thin. I'm running 5ks. He is training for the Helsinki Marathon. Just hearing that word "marathon" makes me feel lazy.

Bestselling author Gretchen Rubin says: "what you do every day matters more than what you do once in a while." If you want to run the Helsinki Marathon, you've got to train and eat well, every day. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld says that the way to become a comedian is simply to write jokes: every day. Husbands, ask your wives if they'd rather have you plan one perfect anniversary date night every year, or show up every day to be your lover and servant and encourager and listener. Every day is what matters.

"Every day" is what matters in the Christian life and in the life of a church. To be a martyr, the Greek word for a true witness of Jesus Christ, what matters most is everyday faith and faithfulness. This was Jesus' challenge and encouragement to the church in Smyrna: everyday faithfulness, all the way to till the end. And it's Jesus' challenge to us today.

I'm going to show you how Jesus calls the church at Smyrna to be faithful by being *real* Smyrnaeans. Then I'm going to show you an ancient "real Smyrnaean" and a 20th Century "real Smyrnaean". Then, finally, we'll look at the truest and best Smyrnaean of them all.

1. Be a "real Smyrnaean"
2. Two real Smyrnaeans
3. The true and best Smyrnaean of them all

1. Be a real Smyrnaeans

Smyrna was a city famous for its loyalty to the Roman Empire. Smyrna was proud of its faithfulness to its lord, Caesar. Even before Rome was dominant, Smyrna was committed. They were Roman before being Roman was cool.

There were some Jews in Smyrna. They decided that Jesus was *not* the Jewish Messiah that they'd been hoping for. So they tried to stop the Christian witness in Smyrna. These church folks were saying "Jesus is Lord," not "Caesar is Lord." So the

Jews there told the rulers of Smyrna that these Christians were not real, loyal Smyrnaeans.¹

In his letter, Jesus says (9) “I know what you’re going through. Your witness-bearing in Smyrna is costing you your reputation and your money. And I know that the synagogue has rejected your witness about me. Satan deceives and accuses. He’s deceived them, and he’s using them to accuse you. It’s all ruining your livelihoods in Smyrna. I know.”

And then Jesus jumps right into the most difficult questions that anyone could ever ask about Christian faith: why do bad things happen to good people? Better: Why does Jesus allow his own loyal followers to suffer?

Look at verse 10. The devil, Jesus says, is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested. What’s going on here?

Jesus doesn’t tempt us. Jesus doesn’t imprison his followers. The devil and his allies tempt and attack Christian believers.

But Jesus *does* test us.

Martin Luther hated God. But then he rediscovered the grace and kindness of God in Jesus. And when he did, he made this other great discovery: “Yes, there is a devil. But he’s *God’s* devil.”

So Jesus is saying to Smyrna and to us in verse 10: “The forces of darkness may come at you, but I’m their sovereign Lord. There’s no lie or attack that I won’t repurpose into a gracious and helpful and loving test of your loyalty---a test that you were made to pass, a test for which I will generously pour out my Spirit to help you

¹ In the Roman empire, Jews had a special status. They did not have to worship pagan gods, or even worship the Emperor as God and Lord. Sometimes when Jews who followed Jesus came to these Jewish communities in Asia Minor and Europe, the Jews of the Synagogue believed. This meant that the Jesus-following Jews could enjoy the same religious exemptions as Jews in general---after all, making Jesus your Messiah was just a fulfillment of and continuation of Jewish faith. Other times the Jews of the synagogues opposed the Jesus-followers, but the local ruler declared that the disputes were all *Jewish* disputes, and so the Jesus-followers still enjoyed protection as Jews. See N.T. Wright, *Paul: A Biography*.

But other times, the Jews of the synagogue would not only reject the message that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. They’d also convince the pagan rulers that these Jesus-followers were unpatriotic, unloyal, and dangerous to their city. That’s what happened in Smyrna. So when Jesus, the fulfillment of every Jewish hope, writes to the church in Smyrna, he says (9) that he knows all the nasty and false things these “Jews” are saying about them. It’s important to remember that Jesus is not anti-Semitic. He’s was a Jew, after all, and still is! It is this particular group of Jews, who are not authentic Jews, that he calls a “synagogue of Satan.”

It’s as if Jesus is saying, “Look, Smyrna is a *loyal* city. Loyal to Rome. My God and Father, of course, wants the supreme loyalty of his people to his purposes. But this synagogue of Jews has decided that they are *Smyrnaeans*, and therefore *Romans*, far more fundamentally than they are Jews. They are clinging to their Roman privileges, and are too proud of them to receive their own Messiah. Believe me. I know how this feels!”

pass, a test that will strengthen your loyalty, boost your confidence, and finally stir up your joy.”

Their enemies in Smyrna were ruining the Christians by saying that they're not real Smyrnaeans. So Jesus says, “don't be afraid. Instead, *be* real Smyrnaeans. The real Smyrnan takes all of their Smyrnan history and tradition of loyalty to the king and his kingdom, and bring it to me, the true Lord, no matter what the cost. Before it is cool. While it's cool. After it's stopped being cool. Always. The true Smyrnan (10) is faithful all through life, and all the way to death. Be a real Smyrnan. Be loyal to me. Every day. All the way to the end.”

2. Two Real Smyrnaeans:

The Martyrdom of Polycarp:

A fellow named Polycarp became the senior pastor or bishop of the church in Smyrna in the year 115. Most believe Revelation was written in the 90s. So that means that Polycarp read this letter. It's only 4 verses long. I'll bet he knew it by heart. He needed it in his heart, because after 40 years of bearing faithful witness in Smyrna, he was arrested for his loyalty to Jesus.

The governor in Smyrna told him “Reject and deny Christ, and I will set you free!” Polycarp replied: “I have served Jesus for eighty-six years, and he never did me any harm: how can I deny and curse my King and my Saviour? I am a follower of Jesus Christ.” Over and over again they tried to persuade him to betray Jesus and switch his allegiance to Smyrna and Rome and Caesar. And he would not. So they tied him to a pole and burnt him alive.

The Martyrdom of Bonhoeffer:

When I first saw Westminster Abbey in London a couple years ago, I noticed that above the entrance are carved eleven statues of 20th Century martyrs, including German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As I stood there looking at his statue, I remembered his famous line: “When Christ calls someone, he calls them to come and die.” Bonhoeffer resisted the Nazis, led an underground network of churches, and ultimately tried to take down Hitler. He was imprisoned and executed.

How does someone become as loyal as Polycarp of Smyrna? I'm about to turn 39. Bonhoeffer was hanged by Nazis for his loyalty to Jesus two months after his 39th birthday. How do I become as loyal as Bonhoeffer? How does a Christian believer, how does a Christian church, develop the spiritual instincts necessary to be able to say, when the pressure is on, "Jesus alone has my loyalty, no matter what"?

The same way that someone learns *anything* that has become "second nature." You finish the Helsinki Marathon not by luck and certainly not by sitting on the couch with a bag of potato chips, but by making the decision to run it, and then by training, every day.

Polycarp had made his one big decision. Then he made all the of little decisions each day, to keep being loyal to Jesus. These little decisions were training for his moment when the spotlight was really on.

Bonhoeffer was born into affluence and privilege and had a joyful and happy home. But from his youth, he knew that following Jesus was a choice to be like Paul and "die daily." It was Bonhoeffer's early decision to follow Jesus, and his decision to die daily, that enabled him to be a faithful witness, even unto death.

Fellow witnesses: the Lord Jesus is in our midst today, holding up the church of Smyrna, and its Bishop Polycarp, and the faithfulness of the martyrs of the first and the twentieth and every century. And Jesus is asking each of us, and our church, these simple questions:

Have we made the one, definitive decision to follow Jesus, no matter what?

Are we deciding every day to keep following, and following, and following, no matter what?

Are we dying daily, in order that we might truly live each day for Jesus?

Are we being real Smyrnaeans?

The Truest and Best Smyrnaean

My favorite 20th Century Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, once said something that stunned me: "Jesus Christ was so full of life that he could afford to die."

I'll bet he got that idea from verse 8. Jesus greets the church at Smyrna by calling himself the one who died and came to life. Some commentators have said that it literally reads: "the one who died and yet lived"---as if to say "you can kill him, but you can't *kill* him."

You see, for you, and for your salvation and eternal life, Jesus brought his overflowing, pulsating, never-ending, inextinguishable, eternal life into a mortal body. And he died daily to himself, serving everyone else instead. Jesus had died so many times by the time that the Romans got hold of him, that *of course* he was going to be faithful unto death, even death on a Roman cross.

And then, full of life, he smashed through death on the third day. And if you've made that definitive decision to give your life to him, to come and die with him, then he has already poured his eternal, resurrection life into your mortal body. *You*, Christian, are so full of life, in Jesus Christ, that *you* can afford to die. Every day, in every test, and even unto death.

The trouble, Jesus says, lasts (verse 10) for 10 days. I think that's just Jesus' way of saying, "for a short while, but not forever, so hang in there. Afterward," he says, "you win the victor's wreath of life. You'll never be condemned. After your death, you'll be raised to life again, verse 11, and, like me, you're never going to die again."

So as we recommit our lives, and the life of our church, to be witnesses of Jesus, let's not ever forget what Jesus is saying to the churches:

He's saying, "If anyone knows what it meant to be loyal in the face of the slander of fellow Jews, it's me. If anyone knows the pressure to give in to the suggestions of the devil---it's me. If anyone knows what it means to be faithful unto death, it's me. If anyone knows what it's like to make a thousand little decisions to be loyal to God, it's me, the Faithful Witness from (8) the first to the last. But if anyone knows what it means to die and yet live, it's me. If anyone knows what it's like to be both tested and supported by God's Spirit, and harassed by the evil one, not for 10 days, but for 40 days in the desert, for 3 years of active ministry, and for 33 years of faithful living, it's me. If anyone knows what it's like to feel a cruel crown of suffering pressed down on their head when what they should have is the wreath of victory, it's me. I've done it for you. I've done it when you couldn't. I've now got the victor's wreath. I've proved myself to be the truest Smyrnaean and the truest Jew. I've now got life! I've now given you my life so that---in me and my strength---you *can*."

When Bonhoeffer was being led to his death, he preached one more sermon, bore faithful witness one more time. “This is for me the end, the beginning of life.” But because Bonhoeffer had first answered Jesus’ call to come and die, and then learned to “die daily” to sin and live for Jesus, he had reached “the end, the beginning of life” already thousands of times.

Will you make it your prayer with me, today, this first Sunday of Lent, 2019, that Jesus would so pour his fullness of life into our lives every day, that we know, from the depths of our being, that we can afford to die every day, because in him we will never die?