

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹ I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 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 the crown of life.

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. (NIV84)

Theme: True Wealth is found in Christ

1. You are rich in faith.
2. You will receive the crown of life.

What's your net worth? You know, if you add up everything you have—the money in your bank account, your investments, your cars, your home, all your possessions—and subtract your debts, how much are you worth? What is your net worth? You hear a lot about people's net worth nowadays, especially when it comes to celebrities.

We tend to value someone based on how much they are worth. That someone is somehow a better person the more he has. Not only do we think this about others, but we have the tendency to think this about ourselves from time to time, “if only I could get that job and make more money that way I can prove to myself and others who I truly am.”

So today Christ tells us that we are all rich, for true wealth is found in Christ. You are rich in faith and you will receive the crown of life.

Our text for today is Jesus' words to the congregation in Smyrna. It was the second of seven congregations that Jesus addressed in his book of Revelation. Smyrna was a well-off city on the Aegean Sea in what is now Modern Turkey. Today, it is known as Izmir. In order to get in good graces with the Emperor, around the time of Christ's crucifixion the city built a temple to the Emperor. So Smyrna became the center of emperor worship. Many inhabitants of that city bowed

down and worshiped Caesar as god. On top of that Smyrna had a large Jewish population. These Jews apparently were rich—well-off and powerful.

Both the worshipers of Caesar and the Jews didn't care much for the Christians. They were different. They didn't bow down to Caesar, they didn't follow the laws of Moses; they worshiped someone who supposedly died but rose from the dead. So the Christians were persecuted. They were mistreated and abused by the Jews. Either naturally, by stealing, or by imprisonment, the Christians became poor. They were persecuted by both the Jews and the pagans. Jesus knew their situation. **I know your afflictions and your poverty.**

Can he say the same to you? Christ certainly knows what you go through. He knows your afflictions. He knows how people have been treating you. He also knows your net worth. Can he say to you, “I know your poverty?” We talked last week about how richly God has blessed us all. He has given us many great blessings on this earth—far more than we need to live. And so we are content with what God has given us. But perhaps you don't have all that much compared to other people. Maybe by America's standards, you are poor. Maybe your net worth isn't really all that much.

The economy isn't the best. You may not have the job you want. You may not make what you want. Perhaps you struggle to make ends meet. Maybe you can't provide everything that you want for your children. And maybe you get made fun of because of what you don't have. Your children get picked on because their clothes aren't the nicest, or their car isn't the newest. And no matter how much we have, most of us will never be called rich. Most of us here today are closer to being poor according to our society, than rich.

And yet, Jesus calls us rich. Just as he said to those in Smyrna. **I know... your poverty—yet you are rich.** Now how can those poor and afflicted Christians be rich? Because they were rich in faith. And so are you. Through faith we receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Through faith in Christ, given to us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel, we receive everything Christ has done for us. By his suffering and death on the cross our sins have been removed. And he has given us his perfect life.

This is something we cannot earn for ourselves. No matter how hard we try, we will never be able to pay for our own sins. No matter amount of hard work, not all the money in the world can pay that price. It could only be paid by the shedding of the blood of God's own son. That is why Peter can say, **it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.** You have that precious blood of Christ. It is yours through faith. And so you are rich. You are rich in faith.

So what matters in life is faith, not our net-worth. Jesus gives that warning in Luke 12, **a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.** We have that tendency to judge someone based on what they own. Or by how much money is in their bank account. But one's net-worth is not a barometer on who a person truly is. In the end it doesn't really matter how much money you have. God is only concerned about one thing—faith. Those who have faith are rich, those who don't, are not.

You are rich in faith because through faith you receive the forgiveness of sins bought for you by the precious blood of Christ. But you are rich in another way—you will also receive the crown of life.

Remember the persecution the Christians in Smyrna faced? It lasted for years. You may remember that in this month's edition of *Forward in Christ* there was an article about Polycarp, a disciple of John who wrote this book of Revelation. Polycarp was the Bishop of Smyrna. In A.D. 156 Polycarp was burned at the stake. All he had to do was throw a little incense to the emperor, thus worshiping and declaring him god and he would be saved. But he refused saying, "Eighty-six years I have served (the Lord), and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?" The world thinks to themselves, "what a waste!" "How can someone simply give up his life like that?" But not God. As Jesus told the Christians suffering through persecution in Smyrna, some 60 years before Polycarp would give up his life. **Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.** The same stands for us almost 2000 years later. Those who stand firm to the end in faith,

will receive eternal life. You will win the victory—through Christ you will defeat sin, death, and the devil. And like the ancient Olympic athletes you will receive the victor's crown.

If you ask an Olympic champion, he will all tell you—the prize he won is priceless. Its worth more to him than any amount of money in the world. How much more the crown of life? It's priceless. It's worth more than any amount of money. It's more precious to you than gold or any amount of silver. This crown is more valuable than the Crown Jewels of England. And yet, it's free. It's a gift given to you by Christ. And it's yours through faith.

Paul explains what Jesus did in 2 Corinthians 8. **You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.** Christ gave up the glories and riches of heaven. He came down to this earth to live as a poor lowly human being. Then he willingly gave himself up on the cross. But not before taking our sin upon himself. As a result he was forsaken by his Father and suffered through the pain and agony of hell. Christ certainly became poor—he willingly became a sinful human being. So that we might become rich. So that we through faith would receive the gifts he won for us. So that we might live with him in heaven forever. In heaven, where we will receive all the glories and riches of eternal life with our Savior. In heaven, where we will receive the crown of life.

So it doesn't matter to you how much you have. Your net-worth isn't important. You don't care if you are poor. It doesn't matter to you if people mock and ridicule you. All you really care about is being rich in faith. For though it you receive the crown of life. You wouldn't give it up your faith for anything. Certainly not for the riches of this world. You would rather be poor by the world's standards and have faith, than be rich yet lack faith. As Jesus asked in Mark 8, **What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?** That is the same point Jesus made by telling the story of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus. The Rich Man had all the wealth in the world. But he didn't have faith. Lazarus was poor by the world's standards. But he was a believer in Christ. The Rich Man's wealth did nothing for him when he died. He went to hell where he suffers forever. Lazarus? He received the crown of life. The ironic thing is that the Rich Man

wasn't rich, but poor Lazarus was rich in faith. What good is it to gain the whole world but forfeit your soul? It isn't good.

If you had the secret to gaining worldly wealth, you would probably tell someone about it. You would share what you learned—especially with those you love. Now if you would share the secret to worldly wealth, how much more would share what you knew about true riches? You know that all of the worldly wealth doesn't matter. Without faith, you are poor. And with faith the precious blood of Christ and the crown of life is yours. The Rich Man figured this out. But it was too late for him—he was already in hell. He begged and pleaded to get this message out to his brothers. He wanted to warn them what would happen to them if they followed down his same path. But it was too late for him.

But it's not too late for you. For you already know the secret to true wealth. And you don't have to do a thing. It has been purchased by the precious blood of God's Son. It comes to you through no work of your own. It is yours through faith. This faith that the Holy Spirit gives to us through the gospel. As Abraham told the Rich Man about his brothers, **They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.**

You have the gospel—the key to true riches. Don't keep it a secret. But share your faith. Spread the gospel so that the Holy Spirit may work faith in to people's hearts. And use what worldly wealth you do have to help share true riches. Give willingly and cheerfully to God. Support the gospel ministry—so our own members may grow in their faith and so that those who do not know about their Savior may hear and become rich in faith. For Christ has made you rich. And you want others to be rich in faith as well. And they too will receive the glorious crown of life.

So what's your net-worth? It doesn't matter, does it. True wealth is faith in Christ. You are rich in faith which receives the blessings won for us by the precious blood of the Lamb. You have the forgiveness of sins and the crown of life. Through faith you are rich. So share your faith and your wealth. So others may receive the crown of life and live with their Savior forever. Amen.