

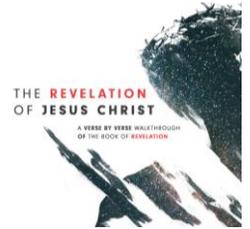
Title: Revelation, Part 6: Strong Spiritual Muscles

Speaker: Charles Stone

Passage: Rev. 2.8-11

Big idea: The persecuted church, Smyrna, shows us five ways to develop strong spiritual muscles.

Memory verse of the month: Rev. 2:4-5 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.



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One of the things I do to take care of my body is that I exercise 5-6 times each week. I do cardio, strengthening my heart muscles, on a stationary [recumbent bike](#). I kill two birds with one stone (play on words there, last name stone...) by reading when I bike.

I also build core muscles with something called a [TRX](#). It's a strap screwed into a beam in my ceiling with handles on the ends. You use your own weight through a set of several exercises to build core.

And finally, I use [dumbbells](#) to keep upper body muscles from atrophying which happens as you age unless you compensate with something like weight lifting. I have this 10 minute video that takes me through an intense routine with the dumbbells.

So, when I do these exercises, I strengthen my muscles. It would not happen without some commitment on my part. I put into my schedule. I don't particularly love it but because I know it is good for me, I do it. It keeps me physically healthy and is good for brain health and spiritual health.

Spiritually, we also need spiritual muscles. We need to develop these muscles so that we can say yes to the right things in life and say no to the wrong things in life. In other words, when we strengthen our spiritual muscles, when tempted to disobey God, do something wrong, sin, our spiritual muscles if we have strengthened them by intentional effort at other times, they will give us what we need to say no to a temptation and yes to God's stirring to do the right thing.

We are in this series on the book of Revelation and are looking at the issues 7 churches in ancient Turkey were facing.

The church today, named [Smyrna](#), had strong spiritual muscles that enabled those in that church to say 'no' to the big temptation they faced, worshipping the emperor. If you participated in emperor worship, job and social opportunities would open up for you and you would avoid the negative social, government, and economic consequences. If you didn't, bad things could happen to you. Those in this church did not yield to the temptation. As a whole they said no and they suffered the consequences and they also received God's blessings for their faithfulness. They were able to say no because they had strong spiritual muscles.

I've titled my message today. [Strong Spiritual Muscles](#).

[Big idea: The persecuted church, Smyrna, shows us five ways to develop strong spiritual muscles.](#)

Each of these images represent one of those five ways and as we go through this passage see if can pick up what these images might mean.

Last week we began a look at these 7 churches that this book was originally written and read to. Revelation is considered a circular letter, to be delivered and read to the churches in these 7 cities.

Each of these 7 churches existed within a unique context, just like WP has a unique geographical and cultural context as well. The seven churches taken as a whole represents the church as a whole and illustrates problems the universal Church has faced in the past, currently faces, and will face in the future.

Smyrna was at the site of the present-day Turkish city of Izmir, the third largest city in Turkey. The only thing that is left of ancient Smyrna is the area about the size of a football field. It was known for its beauty, its public buildings, wealth, fine wines, study of medicine. It became the center of emperor worship. It had a population of 100,000 and was an important seaport as it had a protected harbor.

These 7 churches fall into three groups. Remember, these churches represent the kinds of issues the church today faces.

The first and the last of these churches (red column) were in grave spiritual danger. The three in the middle (yellow) have remained faithful to some degree.

Only the second (today) and the sixth had proved themselves faithful. As Christians we want to emulate the qualities of those over here (Smyrna/Philadelphia). We don't want to be over here (red/yellow groups), but here (Smyrna/Philadelphia).



*Rev 1<sup>8</sup> "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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.*

One of the ways to read and study the bible is to look for similarities and repeated themes in different passages. In these 7 sections to these 7 churches, John uses a [similar flow of thought](#). John...

- [starts with Jesus](#) as the source of power and the solution giver.
- [defines the problem](#), the issue that particular church faced.
- [gives the solution](#) through and encouragement or a correction.
- [states the consequence](#): the spiritual blessings that will follow by heeding his direction.

This is a great template to use today:

- Jesus is the source of all you need.
- You're going to face challenges and temptations in life.
- Look to Him to show you what to do.
- When we do what he wants, he will bless.

**Rev. 2<sup>8</sup>"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:**

Angel might refer to an actual angel assigned to Smyrna. Or, because angel was used as a term for messenger, it may refer to the pastor over this church which may have been one of the earlier Christian martyrs, Polycarp.

**These are the words of him who is the First and the Last,**

Jesus is Lord of history and is control no matter how things seem. They needed to hear that.

**who died and came to life again.**

If you've been with us from the beginning, you may recall these same words appeared in chapter 1 in John's vision of Jesus. I used a painter's palette as a visual to describe who Jesus is and what he has done for us. This vision of Jesus was like a movie trailer preparing us for the complete movie yet to come (the entire book of Revelation). And as John writes to these churches, he reiterates one at a time 6 of the 7 specific phrases he used to describe Jesus in his initial vision as he begins his words to these churches.

They needed to hear this because some of them would die for their faith. These persecutors may take their lives, but their vindication was certain, their eternity secure. Jesus had experienced life at its worst, even death but he had risen and conquered death and his followers would as well.

And this reminder that Jesus is the Lord of history and that he defeated death provides the foundation for the instructions and commands to follow.

Remember that just two churches had only strengths and no weaknesses. And John's scorecard for church success would be vastly different from many of our scorecards today. His scorecard was affliction, poverty, and slander which define struggle and trouble. Yet, even with this, he says they are rich, not in material things and nice buildings, but the eternal riches of his grace.

His description of this church and how he sees them spiritually successful is quite convicting to me. Do I prefer today's scorecards of success in life (money in the bank, good job, nice car) or do I prefer God's eternal riches?

**<sup>9</sup> I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!**

Afflictions really means extensive tribulation, a crushing weight, and poverty is extreme poverty.

Here is the context. If you wanted to move up the social or economic ladder, you had to participate in the Roman emperor worship cult. That is, you must offer sacrifices and bow down to the Emperor as if he were a god. If you didn't, as many of the Christians did not, poverty resulted. They were punished economically. They couldn't get certain jobs. And sometimes mobs would even attack Christians and wreck their homes. This is not far-fetched today in Canada.

A Christian law school out west had a biblical statement on sexuality that students were to maintain a biblical stance on sexual purity. A suit was brought against the school. The Canadian supreme court ruled that if you graduated from this law school, you could not get a law license, effectively shutting out a new law school graduate from practicing law, an economic penalty. The school was forced to drop this stipulation that students must keep themselves sexually pure.

We must understand that as our culture drifts further and further away from values anything resembling biblical ones, especially when it comes to sexuality, gender, and the value of human life, economic punishment will fall more and more on those who don't embrace official government stances, just like it economically affected these early Christians who refused to embrace the then current government stances. They were still good citizens, as should we, but they had to draw the line where it conflicted with their deeply held values and beliefs.

When John writes that Jesus says that even in poverty they were rich, He is reminding us that for every price we pay or injustice or suffering we experience because of our faith in Jesus, rewards are being stored for us in heaven and their value is exponentially increasing.

**I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.**

Anti-Jewish sentiment following the destruction of the temple in 70 AD made Jews especially concerned to guard their Rome-given right to practice their religion, and they felt Christianity endangered what little freedom they enjoyed. So, some, but not all, slandered and ridiculed this small group of believers.

They accused them of cannibalism because of how they described the Lord's supper as the body and blood of Christ. They accused them of sexual immorality because they described their joyous meals together as love feasts. They accused them of atheism because they didn't embrace the Roman gods. They accused them of being arsonists because they spoke about the fire of the Holy Spirit. They accused them of disloyalty to the state because they refused to worship Caesar. They accused them of splitting families because when they became Christians, their Jewish families often threw them out.

Satan means adversary and calls those few hostile Jews, adversaries not only toward the believers but toward God himself.

So, you combine the Jewish resistance to these Christians with the rise of emperor worship, you had a double source of persecution.

<sup>10</sup> **Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.**

In this phrase, Jesus gives a prophetic word, things will get worse, and a word of encouragement, don't be afraid.

**I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you,**

In those days prison was not a prelude to trial, but a prelude to death. If you were put in prison, you pretty much were going to be executed. Satan was behind that.

**and you will suffer persecution for ten days.**

Ten days is probably not a literal 10 days, but most likely describes an indeterminate and rather short period of time. It also may refer the Christians being forced into gladiatorial combat or to be targets of it. Prior to their day to be in the arena, they would be imprisoned for 10 days and death would almost certainly follow.

The big picture here is that as we get closer to the end times, suffering for Christ will increase, but it will not last forever and God will get us through it.

*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials (1 Pet 1.6)*

**Be faithful, even to the point of death,**

That is a sobering thought. Would I, would you be faithful even if it meant your life was taken?

We should take this message of not fearing the future to heart. I believe being an authentic Christian will get more challenging, but we need not give in to fear. God is with us.

*Psa. 46:1 God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.<sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear....*

How do you not be afraid of going to prison and maybe dying there? Jesus is not saying that we won't experience the feeling of fear about future difficulty. He does not mean that we somehow shut off our brain's warning system, the fight-flight system God created in us for survival.

He is not calling us to be a stoic and act like we have no emotions. God created our brains to not like uncertainty and when we feel uncertain about something in the future, it puts our brains on the alert if we need to fight or flee. Uncertainty creates bio-chemical processes that release chemicals into our bodies and brains that gives us emotional sensations including that of fear or anxiety. He is not saying that we have some way to flip a switch and shut off that process so that the body does not work like God created it to work.

He is implying that we must acknowledge our feelings of fear (1 Pet 5.7), but don't be controlled by them. Those feelings will subside as our body turns down the release of these chemicals and its systems come into balance. So God created us to experience emotions. But he also gives us what we need to not let those emotions control and drive our behavior.

Jesus then says this to the faithful.

**and I will give you the crown of life.**

There were two kinds of crowns, a ruler's crown like a king would wear and a victor's crown, like an athlete would wear if he won a race. We are in a race. Jesus wants us to finish the race well and we will receive the victor's crown, eternal life with him.

And at the end of each of these sections about the churches he reminds them to really listen, pay attention to what he says.

<sup>11</sup> **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.**

We are not excluded from the first death. We all will die. The second death is eternal death, eternal separation from God in a real place called hell. Trust Christ and your eternal home is heaven not hell.

Let's go back to the big idea.

Big idea: The persecuted church, Smyrna, shows us five ways to develop strong spiritual muscles.

### 1. Know yourself. What is your recurring Achilles heel?

What is the chink in your armor? In war, the enemy always looks for the weakness in the enemy. Are you self-aware enough that you know your weaknesses?

We all have certain weaknesses that are based on both nurture and nature, environment, and genes.

Some people are more genetically disposed to say fear, anxiety, or even sexual temptation. We might call that our spiritual Achilles heel, that temptation that seems to keep nagging us and is most difficult to resist. It's a persistent area of vulnerability.

Several years ago, a professor wrote a book called *Signature Sins* that begins with the question of why we sin, making the case that each of us has a specific sin or tendency toward that sin that has a unique presence in our lives.

Although there is no specific biblical list of core sins, there are many lists of sins, the ancient Christians created a list of what they called the [seven deadly sins \(lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy, pride\)](#)

So, it's important to know yourself by recognizing your spiritual Achilles heel. How do you do that? Ask the person closest to you who really loves you to tell you what they observe in you that might be your spiritual Achilles heel.

### 2. Take heart: Jesus knows your situation.

He said twice that he knew the challenges the Christians in Smyrna faced. You are not alone. And when we know that you are not alone, it's a bit easier to deal with difficulty and temptation. Right? Be encouraged that these are not idle words or promises, but that they came from Jesus. He lived faced every temptation we faced, but he didn't give in. He knows the defeating kinds of things you face.

### 3. Believe: You have what you need to say 'No!'.

He says that even in the most difficult challenges we face, we are rich. That is, we have everything we need "for life and godliness" as Peter writes. In other words, tell yourself, "I don't have to do, yield, or give in this because it's my cross to bear, I grew up that way, I just can't help it, it's just so hard. Greater is he who is in you that who is in the world. We have these incredible spiritual treasures and resources at our disposal if we draw upon them.

*Heb. 2:18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*

God's promise is that he will never allow a temptation beyond what we can bear.

*No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (1 Cor 10.13)*

### 4. Resist: you don't have to yield to fear.

I didn't say resist the feeling of fear. The feeling of fear, remember, is an automatic bio-chemical response to danger and uncertainty. What might they have been afraid of? The consequences of not worshipping the emperor...economic retribution, social rejection, persecution, and even death.

This is a good question to ask yourself. Is there some fear that lurks behind your Achilles heel? Is it the fear of loss of pleasure from not doing that thing? Loss of acceptance by your friends who do that thing? The change you may have to make by not continuing to yield and give in? The fear of what if I fail again? You must convince yourself that you can still do the right thing with feelings of fear.

## 5. Remember: Difficulty and temptation don't last forever.

Most of our trials and difficulties do pass after a season. Yet, I recognize that for some, it doesn't. It may be a chronic health condition, a wayward child, or some circumstance that you feel may never leave you. If that's the case, keep the eternal perspective. Remind yourself that one day, I will be with Jesus and this affliction will be no more.

But this side of heaven, for most of us, these acute issues do come and go. There is a term called affective forecasting. It's our natural tendency to think about how well we will do with a difficulty in the future, how well we forecast our resiliency, response to that difficulty. In general, we are poor at forecasting this. We underestimate our ability to handle it. So, when you run mental simulations that often are worst case scenarios, remind yourself that it probably will not be as bad as you think.

So, how do we build spiritual muscle to say no to what is wrong and yes to what is right? We've seen five ways. See if you can come up with the idea that the image represents.

1. Know yourself. What is your recurring Achilles heel? *(picture of heel)*
2. Take heart: Jesus knows your situation. *(picture of heart with cross in centre)*
3. Believe: You have what you need to say 'no'. *(treasure box)*
4. Resist: you don't have to yield to fear. *(picture of fear "More faith; less fear")*
5. Remember: Difficulty and temptation don't last forever. *(Infinity symbol)*

So, this week when this temptation/Achilles heel arises, **exert your spiritual muscles** by...

1. Know yourself. What is your recurring Achilles heel?
2. Take heart: Jesus knows your situation.
3. Believe: You have what you need to say 'no'.
4. Resist: you don't have to yield to fear.
5. Remember: Difficulty and temptation don't last forever.