

To Laodicea: You Are Lukewarm
(Sermon 10 – Rev. 3:14-22)
11.17.24

Turn with me to Revelation, chapter 3.

The society we live in has become increasingly intolerant to truth. The cardinal sin of the culture is to offend someone. And while that's difficult enough to avoid, what makes it impossible is the moving of the goalposts.

A word that is acceptable today is suddenly offensive tomorrow, based on the whims of a shifting morality, a victim mentality, and ultimately, a rejection of anything or anyone that tells me there is a specific higher power (God Almighty) who has a specific higher purpose for my life. And that purpose is not to chase the comforts and conformity of this world, but to deny self and live my life to glorify the Savior, who gave His life for me.

That's why Jesus has called His church to speak the truth in love. To speak the hard truth of the sinful rebellion and brokenness of mankind, which leads to the wonderful truth of redemption and forgiveness through faith in Christ.

Jesus not only spoke truth, but He is the embodiment of Truth. He said, "I am the way, ***the Truth***, and the Life." To know Christ is to know truth. And especially for His people, Jesus lovingly speaks truth to us, even when it's hard to hear, which is exactly what Jesus is doing in our text today.

If you ever wanted to know exactly what Jesus wants and doesn't want in His church, it is laid out clearly in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

Walking through these letters, we've seen Jesus commend some Christians and rebuke others. And today, we come to the last church of the 7 - the church at Laodicea. Let's read Revelation 3:14-22 and we'll pray....

[14] "And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. [15] "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!
[16] So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. [17] For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

[18] I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

[19] Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. [20] Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

[21] The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. [22] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

(Let's Pray)

Since we've come to the last of the 7 letters to the churches, let's remember the summary of what Jesus said to each one:

-*Ephesus* – Protect sound doctrine, but don't forget to love God and each other.

-*Smyrna* – Stay faithful in the midst of persecution.

-*Pergamum* – Stay on guard against false doctrine by keeping the message of the gospel pure.

-*Thyatira* – Jesus wants His church to be sexually pure.

-*Sardis* – Jesus wants His church to wake up, and be spiritually alive.

-*Philadelphia* – Jesus loves His church.

And now, we come to Laodicea, and the main message that Jesus gives to that church, which is the central truth of the sermon today:

PROP: Jesus calls us out of complacency into a life of humble, joy-filled service.

Laodicea was an extremely wealthy city. Strategically located as the hub of a trade route, they had lots of money and lots of commerce. And the majority of the city's wealth came from three industries:

1) Banking – Currency was being used more and more, and Laodicea had one of the earliest successful banking systems in the ancient world. Even the Roman rulers would come to Laodicea to cash in their treasury bills because there was such an abundance of coin and currency there.

2) Textiles - One of the main textile products that Laodicea was known for was black wool. While most other sheep were white or speckled, they had bred their sheep specifically to produce a rare, solid-black wool that would be used for clothing. It was rough to the touch, but rare enough to be sought after.

3) Medical school – Respected professors and teachers were brought in to train physicians and develop new medicines. Some of the early forms of mixing medications to remedy different diseases was actually pioneered in Laodicea. And one of the most common ailments was eye infections and irritation caused by blowing sand.

So, you had people that were skilled, successful, wealthy, and the church there seemed to be the same. Very likely one of the first mega-churches in history, they church had lots of people and lots of money. That's not bad in and of itself. But as so often happens, material success gave way to self-reliance and self-satisfaction...and *that* is a deadly combination.

So, in this letter, there are three main messages Jesus gives the church at Laodicea. The first is...

I. A Rebuke for the Spiritually Complacent

As Jesus does in all the other letters, He begins with an introduction that points to specific aspects of Himself, to remind the church of who He is and His authority as Savior and Lord...

[14] “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

-“the Amen” – a word that means “so be it”. It is identifying what is true, to bear witness to the truth, and in the case of Christ, to be the source of all truth – so He is not simply saying “amen”. He IS the “Amen”, the One who is faithful and true.

-Then Jesus says He is the faithful and true witness. That's Jesus translating what "amen" means for the Gentile Christians in the church. He is contrasting His faithfulness to their unfaithfulness.

[15] "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! [16] So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

This is a familiar passage, one that gets quoted a lot. And for good reason. It's one of the most stern, severe rebukes Jesus gives of any church in all of Scripture.

Last week our leadership team attended the SG Pastor's Conference. (Thank you for praying for us). One night we had dinner at a nice restaurant. The food and the service were excellent. After the meal, Bruce and I decided we wanted coffee with dessert. The waiter brought it out, I took a sip, and almost spit it back out. It wasn't hot like I expected. It wasn't even cold like a good iced coffee. It was the dreaded in-between. It was lukewarm.

Jesus describes the church at Laodicea and their works as spiritually lukewarm, and the result is Jesus is threatening to "spit them out", (literally, to vomit). In other words, the condition of this church nauseates the Lord.

If that's the case, we would do well to know exactly what it is that repulses our Savior, and avoid it at all costs.

So what does it mean to be lukewarm? In short, it means to lack zeal, to lack enthusiasm or passion, to take something as amazing and miraculous as the gospel, as God's grace shown to us in Christ, and look at it with indifference, ingratitude and boredom.

"To profess Christianity while remaining untouched by its fire is a disaster. There is more hope for the openly antagonistic than for the coolly indifferent." ~ Leon Morris

That's one aspect of being lukewarm – to generally lack any passion or enthusiasm for Christ, and to just go through the motions. But being lukewarm is more than that. After all, Jesus says, "I know your works". Their actions, their works of ministry, their lives had become empty and ineffective. So Jesus is not just dealing with a lack of enthusiasm. He's dealing with Christians who had become fruitless in their ministry to one another and to the lost.

This imagery of lukewarm water has a specific connection to Laodicea's geography. It was located between two cities – Hierapolis to the north and Colossae to the south.

-Hierapolis was known for its hot springs, used for medicinal purposes. People with all sorts of physical ailments would travel from all over to these hot springs, to soak in them, and help remedy their pain.

-To the south, Colossae was known for their cold, pure water. Clean and refreshing, a rare treat in the ancient world.

-And right in the middle, you have Laodicea, who got the runoff from the hot springs to the north. So by the time that water reached them, not only was it full of calcium and other chemicals that made it bitter to drink, but it would be tepid – or lukewarm. So, with all its wealth and commerce, Laodicea was known for some of the worst drinking water around. They had to use their wealth to buy and bring in fresh water from outside their city.

So those to whom this letter was written would hear Jesus' reference to being lukewarm would be understood immediately. They would hear the rebuke from the Lord as saying, "Your works as a church are empty and superficial. They accomplish nothing. I would rather you be like the hot springs and bring healing, or be like the cold springs and bring refreshment. But you do neither. Like the drinking water of your city, you are un-refreshing, bitter, ineffective, and nauseating."

When a church gathers together and just goes through the motions, without enthusiasm for Christ, and when we go through the motions of ministry without actually ministering grace or hope or love to anyone, when we're not overflowing with the Spirit, overflowing with joy and gratitude, but are satisfied with having just enough gospel to avoid guilt, but not enough to be changed, Jesus looks and says, "That is nauseating. I'd rather you be hot so that you can be molded, or cold that you can be broken. But to be lukewarm is to be of no use to yourself or others."

And what made matters worse in Laodicea was their attitude toward it all. They thought everything was ok. They had a healthy church budget, they had great Sunday attendance, no major complaints or controversies, they thought they didn't need anything. They were culturally comfortable and spiritually complacent.

So not only were they indifferent toward the gospel and lacked any effective ministry, but they were prideful about it, pretending everything was ok. And that brings us to the second message from Jesus to the church at Laodicea...

II. A Remedy for the Self-Sufficient

[3:17] For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

There was a smug self-reliance in the church. A mentality of “look what we have built, look what we have done, look at all we have accomplished with our own strength.”

- They thought they were impressive. Jesus said they were wretched.
- They thought they were to be admired. Jesus said they were to be pitied.
- They thought they were rich. Jesus says they are poor.
- They thought they could see clearly. Jesus said they were blind.
- They thought they were impressively adorned. Jesus said they were shamefully naked.

Any church - large or small – can begin to think we can accomplish spiritual things with human strength. We can bear spiritual fruit with carnal living, tempted to take credit for something good that God alone has done.

That’s the sin of pride and self-reliance. We spend a lot of time in our culture trying to instill “healthy self-esteem” in our kids, to the point that it’s not healthy at all. We spend so much time trying to convince our kids how special they are that when they actually do hear the bad news that they are born sinners and in need of a Savior, they think, “Not me, I’m special. I can do anything!” And if they can’t believe the bad news, they won’t listen to the good news, that Jesus died to save sinners.

For those who have done any personal evangelism, you know first-hand that some of the hardest people to witness to are those who think they’re ok. They have a good job, good marriage, good kids. No major problems. I’ve got it all under control. That’s self-reliance.

But it’s not just in unbelievers, is it? Christians deal with it, too. And the one of the clearest evidences of self-reliance in our lives is a lack of prayer. Meaningful, intentional times of prayer, going to God and seeking His will, seeking His help, thanking Him for what He’s already done,

and asking for what you need. If we're not depending on God in prayer, then we are like the Laodiceans - self-reliant.

And self-reliance is pride. The Bible says "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:1). To depend on me means I won't depend on God. I won't pray and ask God for help. And I will never give God the glory for anything.

What's the remedy? Humility. To humble myself before the Lord, to repent. To confess my sin of self-reliance and call out on Him for help. That's what Jesus tells them in v. 18...

[18] I counsel you to buy FROM ME gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

Each of these allegories or word-pictures Jesus uses has a direct connection to Laodicea. Remember that the city had three main sources for their wealth – their banking, their textiles, and their medical school. In verse 18, Jesus addresses each one...

-Banking. Jesus says they need to "buy gold FROM ME" (emphasized). Stop depending on your bank accounts and investments for your wealth. Come to me, seek me, depend on me for your needs, Jesus is saying.

-Textiles. Jesus tells them to get white garments from Him so they may clothe themselves. We have seen this before, how white garments represent purity and righteousness. But since Laodicea was known for producing that rare black wool, Jesus was likely contrasting the black wool of their own efforts with the white garment of righteousness and purity that only Jesus provides.

-Medical school. The medical school there was known for inventing an eye salve that people from all over would come and buy. Jesus is saying, the eye salve you've invented will not help you spiritually. Only I can do that. Come to me. Only I can cure your spiritual blindness.

Each one of these is a clear statement from Jesus, *"You can't fix this. You can't cure your own soul. You are not self-sufficient. You are self-deceived. What you think you are, you are the opposite. You are pitiful and weak and blind. And no matter what you think, you need me now more than ever. Repent and turn to me, and I will restore you."*

And in case this rebuke seems harsh, in case any in Laodicea would be tempted to condemnation and hopelessness, Jesus assures them in v. 19..

[19] Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

That's a reminder for all of us. If you belong to God, expect to be lovingly corrected by God. The writer of Hebrews echoes this and reminds us that *"the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."* (Hebrews 12:6)

And in His correction of these Christians, Jesus is affirming His love for them. If He didn't love them, He could turn them over to their sin, and just let them live in their sin and self-deception.

But Jesus intervened. Aren't you glad Jesus didn't leave you in your sin! But He intervened and opened your eyes to the truth. When you think on that, that will stoke the fire of a lukewarm heart. He intervened and rescued you, and He deserves all the praise!

Jesus says to these Christians, "Be zealous and repent", another reminder that to repent means not only an apology, but a change of heart. Where they were once indifferent and bored, true repentance will mean they will be zealous and passionate for Christ.

That brings us to the third message from Jesus to the lukewarm. There is...

III. A Reward for the Repentant

[20] Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Again, a familiar verse, but one that I think has been misapplied. This is usually quoted in connection with evangelism, that Jesus is standing at the door of the sinner's heart, softly knocking, requesting permission to enter. I think my grandmother actually had a painting of that very image on her wall.

But that is not the meaning. Remember the context - Jesus is not writing to unbelievers – He's writing to the church. This is a picture of Jesus knocking on the door of the church, of those who profess His name, but have forgotten to commune with Christ.

They have rejected their dependence on Him. They have said with their pride and self-reliance, “No thanks, Jesus. We can do this ministry thing on our own.” And Jesus is saying, in essence, “You have closed the door on me, the owner of the house.” So this knocking isn’t a plea to the lost. It’s a call for the church to repent.

Now, Jesus had the power and the authority to kick down the door and clean house because it’s HIS Church! But He doesn’t. In fact, the wording here is specific. In previous verses, Jesus was addressing to the church as a whole.

Now, Jesus says “If anyone”, meaning any single person, would hear my voice, I will come in and we will break bread, which is a sign of covenant relationship. Jesus is saying, if there are any who are repentant, who will turn from their self-reliance and self-deception, I will restore my covenant with you. Even if the church rejects me, I will show mercy to “whosoever will”, to anyone who will repent and obey.

What an amazing act of love and kindness. Jesus could have written them off. He could have given up on them all. But He didn’t. His mercy and grace were made available to those who deserved it the least.

Does that sound familiar? Don’t we all fit that description? We who deserved it the least have received abundant grace and love and forgiveness of Jesus!

For those who have become lukewarm, those who are complacent and bored and indifferent to the gospel, the way that changes is for us to be reminded of just how amazing God’s grace is, just how deep His love is for us, just how powerful and complete His forgiveness is.

[21] The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Even after Jesus levels one of the worst rebukes of all, He still offers an invitation to repent, and He still promises reward to those who turn and trust in Him.

To the one who trusts in Christ and stays faithful till the end, he is promised to “sit with” Christ on His throne, a picture of sharing in the ruling authority of Christ in the life to come. There is no higher honor that can be given.

And the reason we are able to spiritually “conquer” in this life, as Jesus puts it, is because He already conquered sin for us. Through His death, Jesus nailed our sins and our shame to the cross. He conquered our enemies of sin and Satan. Through His death He conquered. And through faith in His death and resurrection, we conquer.

Conclusion

And then, the familiar ending to the letter, v. 22...

[22] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’’

This is the one thing Jesus has repeated in all 7 letters. Repetition in the Bible usually means emphasis and importance. It’s God saying, “Don’t miss this.”

So, how can we truly hear what the Spirit is saying to us, to this church today?

By each one of us, every single Christian, examining our hearts, asking tough questions, and giving honest answers. Questions like:

- *Have I grown unimpressed with the gospel? When I hear the gospel sung, or preached, or I read it in the pages of Scripture, is my heart moved? If not, why not?*
- *When I do feel numb or unmoved, what do I do about it? Do I take that to the Lord and receive refreshment and joy from Him?*
- *If I am excited and zealous about Jesus and about His gospel, does it show by sharing the gospel with others, and helping make disciples of others?*
- *Are there areas where I’ve started living my Christian life in my own strength? Such as going about my day without starting it in prayer? Am I continually growing in my walk with Christ and in His Word, or have I plateaued and grown complacent?*
- *Do I prioritize the gathering of the local church, taking time to worship the Lord together and for meaningful fellowship with other believers, entering the messiness of the lives of others, and inviting them into mine?*

If we're honest, we all struggle in some of these areas. We all fall short. We all grow cold. But the great news is that Jesus died for that sin, too! Jesus is faithful even when we are not. To even recognize our struggle and to have a desire to change is God's grace at work in you.

So when you start seeing signs of a depleted joy, an indifferent heart, call upon Jesus to help. And the embers of your love for God and others that seem to be going out, the Holy Spirit can fan that flame once again. What is dying can be made alive. What is lukewarm can burn hot once again.

So lay aside the weights that are holding you down, the distractions that are stealing your time and attention. Remember who Christ is, what He's done for you, who you are in Him, and be made new!

Jesus stands at the door of his church and He's knocking. He wants to rekindle your hunger for His word. He wants to reconnect you in fellowship with others. He wants restore to you the joy of your salvation. He's ready to bring real change into your life this morning.

Are you ready?

(Let's Pray)