

A Lukewarm Church

Scripture: Revelation 3:14-22

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People of God: I wish we could have ended this series within a series with the letter to Philadelphia. Because that letter was all positive. But that's not where these seven letters end. It ends with this letter to the church in Laodicea, a church to whom Christ has no positive praise to give, only criticism. This was a church who thought she had it altogether, but instead was found wanting.

This church was located in the city of Laodicea. There are a number of features about this city that are alluded to in this letter. The city was located in a fertile valley, ideal for many forms of agriculture. Raising sheep was one specialty. The type of sheep bred in the area produced soft wool. This was the basis for the textile industry that flourished in the city. Hence the references to clothes in this letter.

Laodicea was also known for its medical school. Among the school's major achievements was the development of an eye salve. Using mud from nearby hot mineral springs, the doctors made a salve used to cure different types of eye ailments. This too is referred to in this letter.

But perhaps its greatest claim to fame was its wealth. Laodicea was a rich city. Because of its location at the juncture of various trade routes, the city became a center of commerce and banking. It was a financial center. The city was so wealthy that when an earthquake caused a lot damage in the city, the citizens refused aid from Rome to help rebuild. Can you imagine any city doing that today--refusing money from the central government? This city was self-sufficient.

There was, however, one major weakness for this city. It did not have an adequate and convenient water supply. The water had to come from a source six miles away. An elaborate system of pipes brought the water into

the city. While for us this is not at all unusual, in those days it made the city very vulnerable. When an enemy came, they could quickly cut off the water supply.

All these historical details are reflected in this letter. Christ uses them to bring his message to this church. It is a message that begins by uncovering their spiritual condition. There are two indications of their spiritual health.

First of all, Christ says: *I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth.*

A common interpretation of these adjectives of hot, cold, and lukewarm is to use them as describing the spiritual fervor of the people. That to be hot is to be on fire for the Lord, eager to work for him. It is to be passionate for God. To be cold, on the other hand, is to be dead to God; to be lifeless when it comes to faith. To be lukewarm is to be neither passionate nor indifferent to God. Instead, it is just to go through the motions of being religious but without the heart really being committed to it. And so the application goes: too many people are lukewarm, their spiritual temperature isn't passionate enough for God. It's time to get on fire for the Lord.

But this application overlooks the fact that Christ would want us to be either hot or cold—just not lukewarm. But how can we be cold for Christ? But we can avoid this problem of application, by looking at the historical background in Laodicea. As I said, the water had to be piped in from many miles away. The city had two sources. The hot water of the mineral springs, and the cold, refreshing water of the mountains. Just as we have hot and cold pipes in our houses, so Laodicea had access to both.

But as the water was piped in it became lukewarm. The hot water cooled down and the cold water warmed up so that the end result was lukewarm water. The benefits are totally lost. It's like our drinks. They're either hot or cold. I enjoy hot coffee, but when it becomes lukewarm, I throw it out. I also enjoy a cold Sprite, but when it becomes lukewarm, it too doesn't taste right. You take a sip and spit it out.

That's the point Christ is making here. The church in Laodicea was neither hot nor cold. It was lukewarm. As a result, Christ is about to spit it out. This church gave neither cool refreshment for those who were spiritually weary nor a hot balm of healing for those who were spiritually sick. In other words, she didn't provide the pastoral care the people needed. She was not a place where believers could get rejuvenated and reinvigorated to live faithful lives. She was not a source of spiritual refreshment. As a result, this church made Christ sick and he is about to throw up.

The spiritual condition of this church is further described by their self-

evaluation. They claimed: *I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.* But Christ says: *But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.* The church thought they were rich, but in reality they were poor.

Financially, the church was rich. This was a wealthy city. It took care of itself. The church shared in this wealth. They met their budget and then some. Their financial independence led to their thinking that they were also rich spiritually. They had all what they needed. They had attained such a high level of spirituality that they could boast: We have all we want.

But Christ says: No you don't. You're not rich. You're poor. Spiritually that is. Christ uses five adjectives to describe them. They are wretched--caught in their own sin and misery. But they don't see that. They are blind to the awful state they are in. As a result, they are pitiful. They are not clothed with righteousness, goodness, and love. Instead, they are naked. They should be ashamed. They are destitute.

And so we have two indications of their spiritual health. The church in Laodicea was neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. They were not rich but poor. What these descriptions reveal to us is a church that thinks they are doing all right when in fact they aren't.

How can a church be so self-deceived? It happens when you look at material indicators rather than spiritual indicators to evaluate the state of the church. Now you can't totally separate these two things. If the church budget is not being met, if members are not willing to give, then the church has a serious spiritual problem. But if giving doesn't really require any sacrifice, then good giving is not necessarily a sign of spiritual strength.

The church of Laodicea boasted in herself. The members focused on themselves, rather than on Christ. It was an arrogant attitude. Look at us. See what we have done. See how rich and powerful we are. We can take care ourselves. We don't need any help. In making such boastful comments, the church neglected her Lord. She ignored her dependence on God.

As a result, Christ calls this church back to himself. He calls her to focus on him. He is the strength of the church. He is the reason the church can boast. In Christ the church can provide spiritual refreshment, rather than being lukewarm. In Christ the church is rich rather than poor.

Christ calls his church back to himself through the opening announcement: *These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.*

Amen—it's a word that ends our prayers. It's the word that concludes the sermon. It means, "this is sure to be it." Throughout the Bible, amen is an acknowledgment of what is binding and true. This description is reinforced

by the next one: Christ is the true and faithful witness. Christ has revealed God to us. We can trust this revelation. We can count on it. It is true. This Jesus, then, is the source of spiritual refreshment. He is what makes the church rich.

Christ is also the ruler of God's creation. Here we have a reference to Paul's letter to the Colossians, a letter that also read in the church of Laodicea. Paul says:

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.

This is what makes Christ the ruler of God's creation. What greater foundation does the church need than he who is the foundation for the world? What better source of strength and power can we find than he who holds all creation together?

And so, Christ calls his church back to himself by advising her to buy from him the items she needs to be the church. Christ says:

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes so you can see.

These three items all allude to the character of this city of Laodicea. Gold to its wealth. Clothes to its wool and textile industry. Salve to its medical school and the development of eye treatments.

For the church to be rich she needs, not the gold of the world, but the gold of Christ. In Him we are rich beyond our wildest dreams. The church also needs to be clothed. In the Bible, to be naked is a sign of judgment and humiliation. We need to be clothed with white garments, which are a sign of purity and holiness. In our natural condition we are blind, blinded by sin and human pride. We need our eyes opened to the grace and mercy of God. We need the healing salve of Christ.

You need to purchase these items. But how can you afford them? How can you pay for them if you are poor, naked, and blind? On your own you can't. That's the reality the church of Laodicea had to face. It's the reality you must face. You cannot purchase these items. Except through Christ. In Christ they are free. Christ has purchased them on your behalf when he died on the cross. That's how dependent you are on Christ.

Christ calls his church back to himself. We hear in these words, words of grace. Christ did not give up on this church. While he says he is about to spit them out, he has not done so yet. There is time for repentance. Christ affirms: *Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline*. Christ loves his church. That is why he may, at times, rebuke us. That is why he disciplines us.

Christ declares: *Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.* Now this verse has often been misapplied. It is taken out of context and is directed towards nonbelievers, calling them to conversion. The picture is often portrayed of Jesus knocking on the door of the unbeliever's heart, waiting to come in.

But this verse is directed not to unbelievers but to the church. The church had ignored Christ but Christ is gracious and merciful. He invites himself back in into their fellowship. He offers to have a meal with them--a meal being an important sign of hospitality and fellowship. Yes, this does call forth a response. It calls the church to welcome her Lord and Savior into her midst. It calls the church to recognize Christ as head of the church.

Throughout this letter, therefore, Christ calls his church back to himself--to focus on him rather than themselves. Because only in that way will they (and us) be rich. Only in that way can they (and us) offer spiritual refreshment, and not be lukewarm. Only with a focus on Christ, can they (and us) be the heirs of the great promise Christ offers here:

To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. After Christ's victory over sin, death, and devil, he ascended into heaven. He sits at God's hand. He who is the ruler of God's creation has complete power and authority. But what is absolutely amazing is that we are invited to reign with him. We too will rule with Christ over heaven and earth.

Now this is a future promise. It will be completed when Christ returns. But already today, we can rule with Christ, even as he rules over the world. As Christians we can be agents of God's coming kingdom, living out the rule of God in our lives and in our community.

He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. We have come to an end of these letters. Letters that reveal the glory of the church. Letters that have also revealed the church's dirty laundry. Whether we are more like the church in Laodicea or the church in Philadelphia is a matter of discernment. But what is true of all these seven churches, what is true of every church since, is that Christ calls the church to follow him, to live out what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, always looking to him as the source of strength.

When we live out our Christian faith, in word and in deed; when our faith goes beyond our Sunday worship attendance, when we desire to seek first the Kingdom of God; then we won't be lukewarm, but will offer the spiritual refreshment our world needs.

He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.