

SERIES: Letters from Jesus to Eight Churches
SERMON: To Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church
SCRIPTURE: Revelation 3:14-22
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Think back with me over the last few times you've entertained someone at your home. As a gesture of hospitality, you undoubtedly asked your guests, "What would you like to drink? Iced tea or hot tea? Coffee? Cold cider (or maybe if it was winter, hot cider)? Coke? Ice water?" I'm willing to wager that no one has responded, "Just give me a lukewarm Pepsi," or even "How about a glass of tap water at room temperature?" Most red-blooded Americans don't like anything lukewarm. We want it steaming hot or icy cold. In fact, lukewarm liquids can be nauseating to us. So can lukewarm Christians be to God. And that is the point Jesus makes in His seventh and last letter in Revelation 2 & 3—the one to the church at Laodicea.

Listen carefully as we read someone else's mail for the seventh and last time in this series (last, because next week we're going to read a letter addressed just to us). Revelation 3:14-22:

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. 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. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 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 shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 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.

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

We use a lot of terms to describe those who are not fully devoted followers of Christ: "Casual Christians," "Nominal Catholics," "Backslidden Baptists," "Pew Potatoes." Each is a term of contempt, or at least a lack of respect, for most of us believe that if it's worth being identified as a Christian in the first place, then one ought to be an authentic Christian. Yet today it seems like many churches are full of nominal Christians—all show and no reality. And the saddest part is that they think everything's cool. It makes Jesus just want to throw up!

Background to the Seventh Letter

On a Sunday in about A.D. 95, while the Apostle John was a prisoner of Rome on the island of Patmos, the Holy Spirit came to him and commissioned him to write the book of Revelation. Part of that commission was to write words of encouragement, correction, exhortation, and promise

to seven churches in western Turkey. Laodicea is the last church on the 250-mile horseshoe-shaped postal route, and in many ways this is the most profound of all the letters.

The City. Laodicea was founded about the middle of the third century B.C. The Greek king, Antiochus II named the city after his wife, Laodice. Located at the intersection of three well-traveled roads, it quickly became a prominent center for banking and industry, renowned for its commercial prosperity. So wealthy was this city that when an earthquake devastated the whole region in A.D. 60, perhaps just 30 years before this letter was delivered, the city was promptly rebuilt without any subsidy from the imperial treasury, such as the city of Philadelphia enjoyed. The Laodiceans were quite proud of that accomplishment.

Laodicea was known for a flourishing medical school, and particularly for an eye salve developed there called “Phrygian powder,” touted as a miracle cure for blindness. The city was also famous for a beautiful black woolen cloth used to make fine garments for the wealthy. The relevance of these facts will become evident as our letter unfolds.

The Author. Christ introduces Himself in this letter, as He does in all of them, with unique descriptions. He calls Himself the “Amen.” This is an odd title, but it was one of Jesus’ favorite words, remembered best by those of us who grew up on the KJV as “verily, verily.” The NIV renders this original Greek word as “truly, truly.” It means “indeed” or “so be it.” Today we might say, “Right on, brother.” It tells us that Jesus is neither fickle nor capricious, but absolutely consistent, for He not only *says*, “Amen;” He *is* the “Amen.”

In addition he refers to Himself as “the faithful and true Witness.” His words are accurate and dependable. You can count on them—100%. Further, He calls Himself “the ruler of God’s creation.” Some versions translate the term “ruler” as “beginning,” leading some to the mistaken notion that Jesus was the first being created by God. (The cult known as Jehovah’s Witnesses is based on this misunderstanding). As a matter of fact, Jesus was Himself the origin of all created beings, as revealed in Col. 1:15-18 and John 1:3. The term here really means that He has the supreme authority over creation. We would all really sit up and take notice if President Bush were speaking to us right now; how much more should this church sit up and take notice when our awesome Lord, the ruler of God’s creation, is speaking.

The Church. The congregation at Laodicea was apparently established by Epaphras, an associate of Paul mentioned several times in his letter to the believers in Colosse, which was about 60 miles to the west. Paul apparently never visited Laodicea, but he did write an epistle to the church. It is mentioned in the conclusion to his Colossian letter: “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea” (Col. 4:16). Why God preserved for us the Colossian letter, but not the one to the Laodiceans, I do not know, though some believe he is referring here to the letter known as “Ephesians,” which may have been a circular letter. (I am satisfied we have all God intended for us to have).

The church at Laodicea appears to be quite prosperous, just like the city in which it is located. There is no mention of persecution from pagan Rome, no trouble from jealous Jews, no false

teachers pandering heresy, nor any sins uniquely highlighted. Yet this church receives the most severe condemnation from the Lord of any of the seven to whom letters are sent. No praise is offered, nor is there even mention of a faithful remnant, as at Sardis.

The diagnosis Christ makes

You're lukewarm. This church is full of respectable, nominal, self-satisfied churchgoers who are inoculated with skin-deep religiosity. They are flabby and anemic. They have compromised with the culture and are comfortable with it. One writer says of the Laodicean congregation,

They had enough truth to salve the conscience without becoming fanatics. It was a comfortable church. You could have attended this church for years and it would have probably been very pleasurable, but nothing much would be happening. You would not be challenged, or rebuked, or corrected, or exhorted, but only encouraged and respected.ⁱ

Sadly, there are thousands of churches like this today, and Jesus says they are nauseating and repulsive to Him. The members may be pleased, but Jesus is not. Their worship may make them comfortable, but it makes Him sick! It sounds as though He would prefer an outright rejection of the faith to the half-hearted way the Laodiceans are living. We have a tendency to feel that so long as we don't blow it real badly, remain respectable, attend church when we're not out of town, give a tithe (or at least something), and serve in some capacity at church or in the community, it ought to keep God off our case.

But Jesus seems to say there is more hope for the openly antagonistic than for the coolly indifferent.ⁱⁱ Maybe it would be better if we were ice cold, didn't go to church at all, and didn't give anything at all, than to make an idle profession without authentic faith. How could that be better? Well, for one thing because then no one would mistake us for the real thing and reject Christ because of the hypocrisy they see in the lives of His followers. Friends, if nothing else comes through to us from this Scripture passage, this must: Christ hates apathy and He threatens to spit it out.

Thankfully this is a threat, not a promise. The KJV reads, "I *will* spit you out," but the NIV correctly reads "I am *about* to spit you out." This is a very strong warning, but it is still a warning. There is still hope for a reversal.

Perhaps the question comes to your mind, "But can't I still be saved even if I'm lukewarm?" I think that is an illegitimate question—it's almost like asking, "How little can I get by with? How uncommitted can I be and still get to Heaven? How ungodly can I be and still be saved?" Instead we should be asking, "How close to *Jesus* can I get?"ⁱⁱⁱ

Now think with me: Is Jesus really suggesting that either hot or cold is OK? No, of course not! His great desire is that we all be boiling hot, i.e. filled with fire, zeal, and passion for Him. But what He hates most is spiritual luke-mia (lukewarmness).

You're kidding yourselves. “You say, I am rich. I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” This self-evaluation of the Laodiceans is far from reality. Something is rotten in the State of Denmark, and they don't even realize it. Why? In verse 17 Christ seems to imply that the church is lukewarm because the pride of the city has infected the church. Just as this wealthy city didn't need Rome's help to rebuild after the earthquake, so the church there considers itself wealthy and self-sufficient. In contrast to the church at Smyrna, which was poor by worldly measures but rich spiritually, Laodicea, is rich materially and poor spiritually.

On the surface they perhaps enjoy new buildings, no debt, perhaps even an endowment, multiple staff, the latest equipment, dynamic programs, growing numbers, and a good reputation. But in reality, Jesus says, “you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.” and they don't even know it. The original language calls this church “the wretched one,” the wretched one *par excellence!* Just how pitiful are they? Well, they are beggars despite their prosperous banks, blind despite their world-famous Phrygian eye salve, naked despite their woolen clothing factories. George Ladd writes astutely, “The church that is prosperous materially and outwardly can easily fall into the self-deception that her outward prosperity is the measure of her spiritual prosperity.”^{iv} I submit that we as individuals often fall into this trap—gauging how blessed we are by God because of our wealth, health, possessions, and positions. The fact is, outward prosperity can be a terrible temptation to self-reliance and spiritual lukewarmness.

The church at Laodicea is kidding itself about its condition because it is using a far different standard than Jesus uses. They are using a human, worldly standard, while He is using a divine standard.

The advice He gives

He says, “I counsel you.” I like that. Here is the God of the immense, unfathomable universe, with countless galaxies at His fingertips, who enjoys the right to issue orders and expect them to be obeyed, saying to this sorry church, “I *counsel* you.” He could command them, order them, and enforce His will with ruthless power and be totally justified, but instead He counsels. He always respects the freedom with which He has endowed His creatures. He doesn't push His way into our lives. But in light of who He is (verse 14), wouldn't it be the height of lunacy to disregard His counsel? The advice comes in three parts.

Acquire from me true riches. “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich.” It's easy to miss the point here by emphasizing the word “buy.” To buy from Jesus might sound like we need to purchase our spiritual rewards, working hard to earn our blessings, which, of course, the rest of the Bible teaches us we can never do. But the emphasis should be not on “buy” but on the words, “from me.” The commercially-minded Laodiceans are being urged to forsake their former vendors (the peddlers of materialism, sex, drugs, alcohol, pride, self-sufficiency, success, reputation) and come to Jesus for true wealth. Christ is the only proper source of goods that will last, so they have to switch their broker from the marketplace to him.^v

Spiritual riches, by the way, are not sitting on the surface, any more than gold nuggets were to be had by the Forty-niners just by driving their covered wagons down to the creek. Just as one has to dig for gold, and the rock crushed and put in the crucible to be refined, so also spiritual riches are the result of a refining process. None of us likes to go into the crucible, but that's generally the prerequisite for spiritual wealth.

Acquire from me white clothes to cover your nakedness. This city, as we have already noted, was famous for its black woolen cloth. But it is possible to wear Armani suits and Dior dresses and still be “naked” in the eyes of God. The Laodiceans need to exchange the black clothes of their culture for the white clothes Christ offers, symbolic of righteousness, purity, honesty, and integrity.

Acquire from me eye salve for your spiritual blindness. Laodicean physicians might aid men in their physical blindness with their Phrygian powder, but only Christ can heal the eyes of those who are spiritually blind. A good friend of mine in St. Louis was an executive with one of the leading companies in the laser eye surgery business. He sat in a pew in our church every Sunday for five years, but he was as lost as he could be until Jesus opened his eyes and he was finally born again by faith.

The concept here is very similar to what God says in the book of Jeremiah 2:13: “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.” If you made a list of the top places you go for satisfaction, what would they be? Sports, food, sex, movies, religion, psychology, the psychic hotline, pop culture, relationships? All these are broken cisterns. None will provide the living water Jesus promised to the woman at the well—the living water of forgiveness and peace and fulfillment and joy, to say nothing of eternal life. That comes only through a personal relationship with Him. How desperately we need to realize that the only satisfying and eternal source of wealth is Jesus. The only way to get right with God is through Jesus. The only place for a blind man to receive spiritual sight is through Jesus.

So far we've seen the diagnosis Christ makes and the advice He gives.

The response He desires

Just before expressing His desires for the church, Jesus tells us something very important about Himself: “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.” The original Greek says literally, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.” There are no exceptions. Jesus wants them to know in advance that His attitude toward them is not punitive but corrective. God never punishes His children, but He does discipline them.

In the book of Hebrews (12:5-11) we read further about the discipline of the Lord. I'd like to read it from *The Message*:

“My dear child, don't shrug off God's discipline,

*but don't be crushed by it either.
It's the child he loves that he disciplines;
the child he embraces, he also corrects."*

God is educating you; that's why you must never drop out. He's treating you as dear children. This trouble you're in isn't punishment; it's training, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves. Would you prefer an irresponsible God? We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God's training so we can truly live? While we were children, our parents did what seemed best to them. But God is doing what is best for us, training us to live God's holy best. At the time, discipline isn't much fun. It always feels like it's going against the grain. Later, of course, it pays off handsomely, for it's the well-trained who find themselves mature in their relationship with God.

This background of discipline provides the motivation for the first response Jesus seeks from His church:

Earnest repentance. "So be earnest, and repent." The tense of the verb "repent" calls for a decisive act of repentance. When we find ourselves in a state of apathy and half-hearted commitment, the only way to correct the problem is generally through a crisis conversion or the rededication of one's life to Christ. This kind of problem is not resolved by increasing effort by 10%. It calls for radical action.

Recently I came across the following pledge that I was told Rick Warren took before his church:

My Pledge

Today I am stepping across the line. I'm tired of waffling and I'm finished with wavering; I've made my choice, the verdict is in, and my decision is irrevocable. I'm going God's way. There's no turning back now!

I will live the rest of my life serving God's purposes with God's people on God's planet for God's glory. I will use my life to celebrate His presence, cultivate His character, participate in His family, demonstrate His love, and communicate His Word.

Since my past has been forgiven and I have a purpose for living and a home awaiting in heaven, I refuse to waste any more time or energy on shallow living, petty thinking, trivial talking, thoughtless doing, useless regretting, hurtful resenting, or faithless worrying. Instead, I will magnify God, grow to maturity, serve in ministry, and fulfill my mission in the membership of His family.

Because this life is preparation for the next, I will value worship over wealth, "we" over "me," character over comfort, service over status, and people over possessions, position, and pleasures. I know what matters most and I'll give it all I've got. I'll do the best I can

with what I have for Jesus Christ today.

I won't be captivated by culture, manipulated by critics, motivated by praise, frustrated by problems, debilitated by temptation, or intimidated by the devil. I'll keep running my race with my eyes on the goal, not the sidelines or those running by me. When times get tough and I get tired, I won't back up, back off, back down, back out or backslide. I'll just keep moving forward by God's grace. I'm Spirit-led, purpose-driven and mission-focused, so I cannot be bought, I will not be compromised, and I shall not quit until I finish the race.

I'm a trophy of God's amazing grace, so I will be gracious to everyone, grateful for every day, and generous with everything that God entrusts to me.

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I say: However, Whenever, and Whatever you ask me to do, my answer in advance is, yes! Wherever you lead and whatever the cost, I'm ready. Anytime. Anywhere. Anyway. Whatever it takes Lord; Whatever it takes! I want to be used by you in such a way that on that final day I'll hear you say, "Well done, thou good and faithful one. Come on in, and let the eternal party begin!"

An openness to intimacy with Him. Revelation 3:20 is a favorite Scripture verse that many of us memorized when we were just children. Do you remember the King James Version? "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him and will sup with him, and he with me." I always heard this verse as an evangelistic appeal to unbelievers. In fact, there is a famous painting with Jesus standing outside a door which has no handle on the outside. Jesus has to knock to get in. This was used to symbolize that God will not force His way into an unbeliever's life; He must be invited in if one is to be saved.

I don't question that truth, but I want you to notice that this verse is not written to unbelievers, or at least not to the unchurched. Certainly there may be unbelievers in any church, especially this one at Laodicea, but Jesus says to the whole church, believers and unbelievers alike, "Here I am. I stand at the door and knock." This is addressed principally to lukewarm, professing Christians.

Furthermore, Jesus is appealing to the individual here. "If anyone ..." Churches can't heed this warning, but individuals can. Any individual—even the worst scoundrel, the most helpless addict, the sorriest prisoner. One of the most amazing stories in the OT to me is the account of King Jehoiachin in the last paragraph of the book of Jeremiah. Jehoiachin was the second-to-last king of Judah. He was only 18 when his father Jehoiakim died, and he had only reigned 3 months when Nebuchadnezzar came and overthrew him, taking him and 10,000 others hostage to Babylon, where he was thrown into prison and the key was thrown away. Jeremiah 52:31-23 takes us 37 years into the future, to the year Nebuchadnezzar died and tells us this:

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah, in the year Evil-Merodach became king of Babylon, he released Jehoiachin king of Judah and freed him from prison on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month. He spoke kindly to him and

gave him a seat of honor higher than those of the other kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes and for the rest of his life ate regularly at the king's table. Day by day the king of Babylon gave Jehoiachin a regular allowance as long as he lived, till the day of his death.

We aren't told why this King of Babylon did what he did, but I see it as a startling illustration of what Jesus offers to do for us if we will hear His voice and open the door: King Jesus will release us from prison and allow us to put aside our prison clothes; He will give us a seat of honor and allow us for the rest of our lives to eat regularly at the king's table.

The heart is likened here in Rev. 3:20 to a dwelling. You have yours and I have mine, and each of us likes to rule his own roost, to be king or queen of our own castle. But so long as we are ruling, Jesus cannot. And if He does not, we cannot experience the true wealth he has in store for us. On the other hand, if we lower the drawbridge and open the door, Jesus will come in and transform us from paupers into princes, He will cleanse us and clothe us, He will share our meals with us, He will make His home in our hearts. But we can't just let him on to the patio or even into the entry hall. He wants to come into the living room, the dining room, the bedroom, the closets, the drawers, the mail, even the computer hard drive. His flag must fly from our roof.

The prospect He offers: To rule with Him forever!

“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.” This prospect exceeds in glory all the other promises made to the overcomer in these letters. The throne is the symbol of conquest and authority. Jesus said in the Gospels, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth,” and now we see that He is ready to share that authority with us. Friend, if we let Christ enter the house of our heart, He will let us enter the house of His Father. If we allow Christ to sit with us at our table, He will allow us to sit with Him on His throne.

Conclusion: I challenge you to take your spiritual temperature today. Are you hot, cold, or lukewarm? You know, you can't change your body temperature by just thinking about it. You can't *will* your temperature to go up or down. Sometimes external factors affect it—like extreme heat or extreme cold, and sometimes internal factors affect it—like disease. If external factors have caused your heart to be lukewarm, then do what it takes to change those factors. Maybe you need to abandon some relationships, change some habits, adopt some new disciplines. You know what they are—reading God's Word and praying, an attitude of expectancy when we come to worship, the cultivation of loving relationships and personal accountability, a heart of generosity and service and sharing of one's faith, a life of holiness lived in His honor.

But if internal factors have caused the problem, strong medicine or even surgery may be indicated. Go to the Great Physician and submit to His treatment. Invite Jesus to set your heart ablaze for Him. Let us all, individually and as a church, not be satisfied with being lukewarm, but rather let's resolve to be on-fire overcomers for Jesus!

i. Ray Stedman, *The Rich-Poor Church*, Discovery Papers, Catalog No. 4195, 2a.

ii. Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, 82.

iii. Clearly God does not demand perfection from us in this life in order to be saved; otherwise Heaven would be empty of all but the Trinity. Yet He also clearly demands some evidence of genuine faith, for His Word tells us that “faith without works is dead.” Not weak, not anemic, but dead! The great danger for many who are lukewarm is that they may not even *know* whether their faith is genuine or not. They’re not alert enough to know whether they’re sleeping or dead.

iv. George Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 66.

v. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, 208.