

LOVING A LUKEWARM CHURCH

Revelation 3:14–22

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Revelation 3:14–22 says, “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” (NIV).

This is the seventh letter of the Lord to the churches in a region now known as western Turkey. Then it was the Roman province of Asia. Revelation 1 portrayed these seven churches in the figure of lampstands, arranged in a circle. That’s what they were geographically, in a circle.

I. Some persons have seen these churches as a prophetic ladder, that they represent seven ages of the church’s history.

The first letter, the letter to Ephesus represents the apostolic church, which was at its close beginning to lose its first love. But the second letter, to the church at Smyrna, represented the second and third century of the church, the church of the martyrs whom the Lord has nothing to

condemn in it but only commendation. The third letter, the letter to Pergamum, those who hold this view say represents the time during the reign of Constantine when there is an elevation of the clergy of the Nicolaitan heresy at Pergamum and the beginning of compromise in the church. Thyatira represented the age of the papacy. Sardis represented the time after the Reformation. Philadelphia, the sixth letter, represented the missionary expansion of the church. Laodicea, the last, the seventh letter, represented the church just before the Lord returned, the church that was lukewarm.

I've had some experience working with picture puzzles. I love to put them together. One of the experiences you get is the realization that a piece that looks like it's going to fit somewhere often doesn't. You can do funny things with that individual piece if you force it to fit. If you do that with too many pieces, when you look at the whole puzzle it will be an odd mish-mash of arrangement and there are those who hold this particular view who do not realize that there are pieces in the puzzle that don't fit. Time doesn't allow me to go into all the places I think people force the text. But one big piece is certainly the Laodicea piece, the end-time church that is lukewarm. Those who advocate this point of view perhaps do not realize that in the last thirty years the greatest missionary expansion in the history of the church for twenty centuries has occurred. I think what we need to do in looking at these letters, is recognize as we have tried to do all along, that these are letters written to real churches in the first century. But they are also representative in character. You can take any given seven churches and find characteristics of Ephesus or Smyrna or Laodicea in those churches. You can take us as a congregation today and find some for whom the Lord would have nothing to condemn and some for whom the Lord would have nothing good to say. Others who would be lukewarm and others who may have little power but the Lord has set before them an open door. These in terms of their devotional

applications speak with great meaning to us. You cannot necessarily fit them in some sort of prophetic mold.

As we look at the letter to Laodicea we notice how carefully each of the letters is divided and arranged.

II. To understand the letter, we first have to understand something about the city. The church in each case many times takes on characteristics of the city.

The city of Laodicea itself was of kind of paradox. It was a city on the one hand of failure. On the other hand it was a city of success. It was a city of failure in that it had not achieved the purposes for which it was founded. It was founded for two purposes. It was founded to be a fortress city on the great road that ran from Ephesus to the east, to Syria. The only problem with this city was that once they built it they discovered that there was no water supply within this city and that the city had to depend upon the water supply that was six miles away to the south. They had to lay an underground aqueduct to feed the water into the city. When an army would surround Laodicea it would quickly discover that the city was totally dependent on an outside water supply and would quickly cut off the water supply so the city would have to surrender. So it was not a very good fortress city. Not only that, it was founded to be in a sense a missionary city for Greek culture and Greek language. Whereas Philadelphia, the sixth city we looked at, had effectively taught the Greek language to the citizens of its surrounding area, this city had been a total disaster. It was meant to Hellenize or give the Greek culture and language to the region of Phrygia and it had completely failed in its mission, so people weren't learning Greek or Greek manners. So in that sense it had been a failure.

But it had also been a great success for three reasons. Laodicea was the kind of town that needed peace to prosper. It couldn't exist in a tense time. It was very descriptive of Christians who could

get along in their spiritual lives if they feel everything was going well. But let something go wrong and then things are a real danger. Here is a city that can prosper in peace. The Romans brought peace. Therefore Laodicea was a city of great banking and became noted for its wealth and banking industry. In fact, it boasted of its wealth. There was a great earthquake in 60 A.D., about thirty years before this letter was written to the church. That earthquake destroyed the city, but the city had so much money that it rebuilt without any government aid from Caesar. This would be equivalent to Newport Beach being destroyed in the next earthquake and being so wealthy that it wouldn't need any federal or state aid to rebuild. You can imagine the kind of smugness of that sort of a thing. The kind of spirit that refuses government help is rare these days. And it was rare in these times. But Laodicea was wealthy enough that it said, "We can get by without government aid." It was a city known for its wool industry and the garments it manufactured. A particular kind of sheep that had black wool was popular in the area. And the area was noted for its medicine. In Laodicea there was the headquarters of the export industry for eye salve that was used throughout the world that came in the form of tablets. You ground it up and mixed it with doughy paste and applied it to the eyes. And in days when people didn't wear glasses they put this on the eyes and thought that it improved their eyesight. So this town was famous for its eye salve. All these things become important as the Lord writes this church. Something of the character and nature of the town.

III. To this church the Lord identifies himself in terms of His character.

In verse 14, He calls himself first of all the "Amen." We think of "amen" as something you say at the end of a prayer and it is. Or when the service is over, the "Amen" is said and it becomes the last word and it means "So be it." Here the Lord, by calling himself the "Amen" at the beginning is reminding us that He who has the last word is foremost and He has not adapted

himself to the changing nature of compromise that has been Laodicea's history. It had no strong character of its own and therefore it had to get along with whatever interest or political power was reigning. It had compromised. The Lord by identifying himself as the Amen—and Amen at its root means strength and firmness—is reminding this church that there is a certain kind of inflexibility and strength about Him that He will remind it of before He begins to address its compromising. In verse 14, He also describes himself also as the “faithful and the true witness.” The word “witness” when used of the Lord says that He is the one who has first-hand knowledge. A witness is one who has firsthand knowledge of something that's happened. So the Lord has firsthand knowledge of us, firsthand knowledge of His church, and because He's the faithful and true witness He will disclose His witnessing and what He sees to us so that we'll know what is on His mind. It's become important to us as we are getting to the application of the letter.

The third way that the Lord represents himself in terms of His character is that He calls himself the “beginning of creation” (Revelation 3:14, KJV). It is not being said that the Lord himself was created. A better way to read this would be to understand that “beginning” here means “source.” Jesus identifies himself as the source of creation. One of the problems in the church, in the town as well, is a certain kind of self-sufficiency that says, “We don't need anything else. We don't need the Roman government.” And the church has almost gotten into the kind of state that says, “We don't need the Lord. We're perfectly ok with the kind of programs we're running.” The Lord is identifying Himself as the source of everything, without which, if our roots are not linked into His life, our life is not worthy in His eyes.

IV. As Christ continues to address this church, it has been a customary practice in the letters that He would find something in the church to commend but at Laodicea He finds nothing to commend.

Two churches have this quality: nothing to commend. I have problems with that. Psychology today says always find something in someone you can affirm. Persons who occupy a pulpit are not supposed to get into anything negative. We're supposed to affirm people and help them achieve the goals they have in life. I think there's a great deal of truth in that. But the ultimate task that I have as one who proclaims the Word is to help you realize the goal that God has for your life. Sometimes the Lord will say no affirming words to us in order to get our attention and get us to realize there is nothing in our experience He can affirm. I would be impressed with the church at Laodicea. The fact that it has need of nothing would suggest to me that it had seminars to teach other people how to do things. It would have an impressive building. It would have had an impressive organization. It would have had an impressive financial record, and an impressive record of membership. It would have truly been a church, which was a model of the way a church ought to run. It had become very smug in its way of doing things.

So the Lord must speak to this church in terms of condemnation. His condemnation is found in verses 15–17, two reasons for His condemnation. One reason why the Lord condemns this church is that it is lukewarm. He says to it, "I know your deeds" (NIV). He uses that phrase continually with the churches. "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" (Revelation 3:15–16, NIV). There are two ways to understand here what the Lord is saying by cold and hot. One typical way that we've frequently understood this verse is that the Lord prefers either a red-hot spiritual commitment to Him or an outright antagonistic attitude

toward him. He'd rather have you an all-out saint or an all-out sinner. One or the other but don't stand in between.

However, there's a little bit of problem with that particular view. It is saying something about the Lord being happy when you embrace evil. That He would rather have you doing that than just playing around. Maybe there's some truth to that, that sometimes when we're outright cold to that, like Saul of Tarsus, we're more sensitive to hear His voice. But when we're in a lukewarm situation everything may be too cozy for us. I think, though, that the context of the geography of the area may suggest another interesting alternative of what the Lord means when He says "I would rather have you hot or cold."

There were two towns that were close to the city of Laodicea. Six miles away to the northeast, was the town of Hieropolis. It was a town that was noted for its steaming, sulfur hot water. That hot water provided refreshing baths for people who needed hot, Jacuzzi-like water. Ten miles south of Laodicea was Colossae to which the letter of Colossians was written. It was noted for its pure cold water, which was very refreshing. It seems to me what the Lord was saying to this church is "I've sent people to you who were weary in spirit. Your atmosphere was so tepid—it was not hot—it couldn't refresh and breathe life into those tired muscles spiritually of the people I sent to you. You weren't at all helpful to the spiritually weary. And to those who were spiritually thirsty who came to you—all they saw was your organization. They went away with their thirst unquenched. They wanted to drink of the life of Christ but instead they found a typically poor spiritual experience."

For people who are spiritually thirsty, who are looking for real answers and real life and real people in this world, it is a devastating thing to come into the body into the body of Christ and

sense a lack of earnestness, a lack of concern about the very questions and matters that have driven them to seek for answers.

The Lord is saying, “It seems to Me you’re not refreshment, and you’re not a source of healing for those who are weary. I’d rather you were one or the other. But since you’re not I’ll spew you out of My mouth.”

Here he’s not talking about personal salvation but the usefulness of the church. The Lord is saying that He can’t use a church like that. “You’ll have to get out. You’re not in My plans.”

What this says too about our lives individually is important. The Lord wants our lives sometimes to be a cool, beautiful river of water, which can provide water to someone who is thirsty. Other times He wants it to be kind of a warm blanket around someone who is really out in the cold of life and is hurting and is very weary. He wants us to just surround that individual with caring and the warm, hot presence of healing. So the Lord says “You’re neither hot nor cold.” And He rebukes them for it.

A second reason which the Lord condemns this church this church for is false confession. Verse 17 says, “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” (NIV). Their perception of what they were differed completely from the Lord’s perception.

If you see a blind person do you want to strike out at them in anger? If you see someone who does not have many clothes because they are too poor, do you want to get angry with them?

When you see someone who is poor and begging alms, do you get angry with that person?

You’re filled with compassion. The Lord’s words in verse 17 strike me as compassionate words to a lukewarm Christian and to a lukewarm church. He’s saying, “If you only knew what you’re really like!”

God is not mad at the lukewarm Christian. That's a person who just doesn't really have it together and trying to present a bold front to the Lord and to the world. The Lord is moved with profound sorrow and says, "You really don't know, do you? You really don't know how poor you are. You really don't know you can't do what others do. You can't do what I want you to do." How did the church get into that kind of position? How did it become wretched and miserable and poor and naked and blind?

I think as we look at it we'll find that the way it fell into this condition was it failed to maintain a personal relationship with the Lord through prayer, through waiting upon Him. It became so busy doing its own thing as we sometimes do as people, busy doing our own thing, the Lord becomes somehow excluded from our affairs. As a result we wind up becoming these kinds of qualities in the Lord's eyes: wretched, miserable, naked, blind, poor. So the Lord calls us to personal fellowship that we might have that introspection and evaluation which is necessary to grow spiritually.

V. The Lord then speaks words of correction to this church in verses 18 through 20.

He never leaves us with a word of condemnation. He always shows us the way out. He calls us in verse 18 to a new dependence upon Him: "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; salve to put on your eyes, so you can see" (NIV).

The three leading industries in Laodicea were banking, wool, and eye salve. These three industries the Lord specifically refers and locates as belonging to this church. "Bankers, money in the church—good. Buy from Me the gold that has been refined by fire, that which cannot be taken away. You're noted for your wool, your black wool. Buy from Me the white garments of

righteousness, which I can give. Are you noted for your eye salve? How about getting some eye salve from Me so you can really see what I see, really see yourself as I want you to see yourself.”

If we take for granted that what was wrong with this church was that it was not providing cold water to the spiritually thirsty or not providing hot water to the spiritually weary what the Lord is telling it to do at this point is so critical that He does not say to the church, “Go start getting to work, start giving cold water to spiritually thirsty people and hot water to spiritually weary people.” He says, “Come and buy it from Me.”

In other words, the answer to the church’s lukewarmness is not to engage in a whole lot of new effort to maximize its programs and increase its facilities and increase its treasury. What the Lord says is “Come back to Me. Then I’ll give you what I want you to do. I’ll give you gold. Or I will give you clothing [which I understand “clothed in white” means works of righteousness] and I will give you eye salve so you can see and perceive who I want you to be with, what I want you to be doing, where I want you to be going. Come back and enter into fellowship with Me and when you’re back in fellowship with Me then you can see your task.”

So He calls this church to a new dependence upon Him. “Quit depending upon yourself” He’s saying.

And He is calling in verses 19,20 for a decisive and ongoing response to His love. “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (NIV). Here the Lord is telling us that what I said about verse seventeen is true. It’s spoken in an angry tone of voice for He loves deeply this lukewarm church.

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest [or, “zealous”], and repent” (NIV). The word “zealous” here is in ongoing present tense. It means “Now really get zealous for Me”; and “Repent”—decisive action. Do it all at once. Do it now. How we repent is told in verse 20,

one of the most beautiful verses in all of Scripture. “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” (NIV). We use this most often as a salvation text. And it is beautiful salvation text. It shows Christ standing at the door of our hearts and asking entrance into our lives. But the original context of this text is that it’s written to a group of Christians and it is to Christians that the Lord is speaking this word “Behold I stand at the door and knock.”

When we realize that this is being written to Christians, we notice immediately some characteristics of Christ at the door of our life. The first thing that I notice is the shame of His being outside. How in the world does the Lord get excommunicated from the church? Here’s the church going about its affairs as usual and the Lord has wound up on the outside saying, “I would like entrance back inside. Or how do we become, in our own individual lives, so busy about our own priorities that the Lord finally has to say to us, “Do you realize I’m now on the outside? You have so limited Me to the periphery of your life that for a while you had Me pressed against the wall until there was no room for Me and I had to slip outside. Now would you realize I am on the outside and I would like back in.”

Shame of His being excluded from our lives. That we could still name ourselves Christians and have missed the dimensions of what is involved in being Christians having Christ at the center. So there’s shame.

I think the second thing I notice about Christ standing at the door is the surprise that He’s still there. If we were to translate this verse literally it would read something like this “See I have taken My stand at your door and I am continually knocking.” The nature of Jesus just defies our imagination. Suppose you had gone to someone’s home to visit them, a friend whom you really love, and they said to you as you knocked on the door, “Come on in.” You entered and sat down

and they promptly ignored you and kept on doing what they were doing like watching TV or something like that. After a few hours there and no words spoken to you, you finally would say to yourself “That the last time I ever go to their house! They treat me like this. I’ll go to my own house and when they’re ready to make up they can come call on me.” You’d probably say it a little more steamed up than that.

How humble the Lord is having been put out of the house He belongs in. He takes His place at the door and says, “I’m knocking. You don’t have to come to Me. I’m coming to you.” I don’t think the Lord is pounding on the door to break the door down. The door opens to the touch of the person on the inside. But there’s an incredible surprise that He is here. What a model, by the way, for personal relationships where we have been wounded or hurt by someone else and we say “When they come to me and say “I’m sorry,” all right, but see if I’ll ever have anything to do with them until they do!” We have the example of the humble Lord who takes His place at the threshold of our life and says, “You’ve hurt me; you’ve ignored Me; you’ve wounded Me. But I’m still here. I’d like back in please.”

A great Jewish scholar said “The one thing that no Jewish prophet or Jewish rabbi ever conceived of is the conception of God actually going out in quest of sinful men who were not seeking Him but who were turned away from Him.” It’d be great enough to think of a God who accepted us back when we came to Him. It is almost beyond belief to think of a God who goes out and searches and stands and knocks at our door. There is surprise that He is there.

And there is the supper that He wants to eat. “If any man will open the door I will come in to him and sup with him,” says the King James—and I think accurately—in verse 20. “Sup” is the shortened word for “supper” and that’s the meal that the Lord wants to have with us. In ancient times, times when this letter was written, there were three meals to the day. Breakfast was eaten

in a hurry, kind of our equivalent to coffee and doughnuts. Then there was lunch which was a picnic snack which was taken along and eaten somewhere in the middle of the day in the colonnade or city square. It was a meal eaten in passing, eaten in a hurry. The main meal of the day was supper where one ate and lingered and talked. In the days before TV and radio, that was a great thing—to eat and to linger and to talk. The Lord says “This is the meal that I want to be part of. I want to be again in your fellowship. If you will open the door I will come in and eat with you.” That is, as the Lord comes in we will offer to Him what we have. Then He’ll turn the tables for not only does the Lord say He’ll eat with us but then He says we will eat with Him. Verse 20 says specifically, “I will come in and eat with him” and then he changes it says “and he will eat with Me.” That is the Lord says, “I will also provide for the table. What is lacking I will make up. So not only will I eat from My host’s bounty but the host will eat from My bounty.” I’ve got a picture of the Lord standing at the door and knocking. But behind Him I see all kinds of butlers and maids lined up with all kinds of delicious dishes right behind Him. He’s knocking and He’s got this promise. “I’ll eat with you but you’ll eat with Me. I’ve got better things than you’ve got on that table. Let Me in, will you?” The Lord had become excluded from life and He wanted back in.

I’ve wrestled with this and continue to wrestle with this, this matter of being so caught up in doing whatever I’m supposed to be doing—even if it’s good and even if it has the noble title of ministry attached to it but it’s possible to be living days and one day flows into another and one day goes on and another day goes on and Christ somehow is excluded. He is not admitted. So the fellowship with Him that should begin the day closes the day. To say from the heart, “Lord come in, direct me, have fellowship with me and take my priorities this day.” When we push the Lord out of our experience, He graciously and humbly stands outside of our life and starts knocking.

We can let too much noise exist in the room of our lives, so much noise we don't hear Him knocking. Sometimes the purpose of gathering together in worship is simply that we can hear that knock. So the Lord knocks and says, "I will come in." Somebody's got to open the door. What's striking to me, and this may apply to the whole church, that if someone from the church gets up and opens the door and admits the Lord back into the body of believers then the whole of believers get to enjoy the experience of the Lord's presence which one believer has opened. What the implication of this is to our worship, especially believers' needs when we gather together, is saying that a whole body of people may be going out eager for the Lord's presence but it takes one who has the earnest desire for the Lord to be there which will open the door to the Lord's presence for everybody else. It's kind of an intriguing thought.

Christ gives the challenge to conquer in verses 21–22. "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" (NIV). The church, which Christ threatened to spew out of His mouth, is now offered a seat with Him on His throne, the highest place is within reach of the lowliest. Jesus says he who has an ear to hear, let him hear. We may miss His knocking, so the Lord calls us to respond.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, as we come to You today we come grateful for Jesus, for the humility of His life which is so representative Father of your own life. Jesus, that You should come to us and in Your gentle way call us back to fellowship. We realize that there are times that You may use strong measures with us when we have been disobedient. But Your preferable method is that You would come to us with gentleness, that You would need beat down no doors but take Your place as a gentle person, at the doorway of our life. Lord, You sent this message to all of us today. Especially, You've sent it to those among us whose lives do not quench the spiritually thirsty and

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do not provide spiritual resource for those who are weary with the wounds and the brutalization of life. You're not asking them today to do anything specific like go out and be in drawing water from a well or anything like that. You're saying to that person as You said to me, "Come back into fellowship with Me and start admitting Me. Quit putting Me on the outside of your experience, becoming so busy with your affairs of your life that I'm not in the midst of you." So Lord, we would be zealous and repent. And I'm convinced that You sent this word today so we could respond to it. It's one thing in a service like this to make commitment, but the commitment You seek is a commitment that will change us from now on. You let Your Word today be a mirror by which we can see ourselves. You've also let it be a portrait of You and how You want us to be. So let us obey in Your name, in the name of Jesus. Amen.