



Combating Lukewarmness

Seven Letters to the Churches: Revelation Series #6

Pursuing Holiness Together, Series #2

Revelation 3:14-22

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We'll be looking in Revelation 3 at the letter to the church in Laodicea, where John says, *"Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm...I will spit you out of my mouth."* I told a joke in first service that didn't go over well. But just so you get the same experience, this is what I said. "On a day like this with zero temperature outside, lukewarm doesn't sound all that bad."

I don't want this passage to remain simply an emotional plea for more fire from God that stays pretty abstract and subjective. I wish I had more fervency for God. The passage has a piece of that in here, but I want more specifically to look at why they were described as lukewarm and for us to see our desperate neediness for God.

So let's ask God to help us with that as we look into His Word.

God, we desperately need You. There is nowhere else we can go. There's nothing else we can do. I pray that You will help us now, as we look to Your Word at a passage that is familiar for many of us. I pray that we wouldn't just ignore these warnings or assume they are just trying to get us pepped up or more energetic and passionate. I pray that a love, fervency and zeal for You would be rooted in and growing out of a true heart belief that acknowledges our desperation for You over anything else in this world. Help us, Holy Spirit. Open our eyes to Your Word and apply it to our hearts correctly. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Over the past year or so I've been preaching through each of these letters to the seven churches found in Revelation 2 and 3. For those who haven't heard them, I want to give about a two-minute overview of where we've been. Revelation opens with a picture of the majestic, sovereign, reigning Christ. It's a different perspective on Him than we see in the Gospels, as Jesus is displaying here all of His rule and power.

Then Jesus is evaluating these churches. He begins by giving messages to these churches that specifically respond to the needs they have. In these last days, as Jesus is giving this revelation of Himself and of the times that are coming, He's showing His people that no matter what comes, He is in control and is accomplishing His purpose: He is going to come again and judge the wicked. His wrath will be on full display. He is also coming to save those who are His children and make all things new.

He's kind of giving the end of the story here, but in the meantime He's calling His church to hold fast to Him, whether it stands against an internal temptation to be swept into the cares of this world or it stands against external persecution or the temptation to give into false teaching and idolatry—or to simply give up because the times are tough. Either way, whether external or internal pressure, Jesus is saying, “Hold fast to the end. It's worth it.”

Let's look brief at each of these churches:

1. He starts in Ephesus, telling them that doctrine and works without love is deadly. He says, “Just because you know the right things and do the right things—if there's no love for God and love for others, it's deadly.”
2. Then we looked at Smyrna, who—in the midst of persecution—Jesus is calling to be faithful until death.
3. We then combined two churches, Pergamum and Thyatira, who were tolerating the false teaching that was creeping into the church. Jesus tells them to turn away from it.
4. Then we looked at Sardis, where He says to them, “You appear to be alive. You look good on the outside, but in reality you are dead.” So He calls them to wake up to new life.
5. Then to Philadelphia He says, “There's an open door in front of you, but hold fast to what you have.” He calls them to faithfully persevere in faith and obedience to Him.

Now we come to Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-22:

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.”*

This letter to Laodicea begins, like the other six letters, with a description of Jesus. It links back to the description in chapter one where Jesus’ glory, power and dominion are on full display. He says, *“The words of the Amen.”* When in His ministry Jesus would say, “Truly, truly I say to you...,” it is the same word. “Amen, amen, I say to you.” So here Jesus is rooting this promise and threat He’s about to give in the fact that He is the True One. These are *“...the words of the Amen, the faithful and true Witness.”* Jesus is saying, “What I am about to say is reliable.”

Then it says, *“...the beginning of God’s creation.”* This is similar to what we find in Colossians 1, where it says Jesus is the Firstborn of creation. It’s not saying He was the first created being, but rather that He is preeminent over all creation. He’s the beginning of creation in the sense that He’s the source, the One Who began all of creation. John 1:3 says, *“All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”* So before Jesus says some very strong words to this church, He says He is *“...the Amen, the faithful and true Witness.”* He’s the One Who began all creation. He has full authority and power to say what He’s about to say.

He then describes this church, saying, *“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”* Here are words from Jesus that would have landed on this church very severely.

If Jesus were to write a message to New Covenant Bible Church and said, “I’m going to spit you out of My mouth,” I think we would listen up. This is a stern warning, a threat of coming wrath. He’s going to reject them.

You may have heard that Laodicea was a city that did not have its own water supply, so water was piped in through aqueducts from different cities. One city likely had a hot spring that sent hot water, while another city sent cool water, and by the time it got to Laodicea, it was lukewarm. Others have pointed to the fact that mineral deposits may have collected in their water and could make the people sick. So this is likely an illustration these people would have understood.

What’s difficult, though, is taking this metaphor Jesus gives and maybe going too far with it—trying to figure out exactly what He means by hot and cold. Some would ask, “What does a

hot beverage do?” It soothes and comforts. “What does cool water do?” It refreshes. So they would say Jesus is encouraging us to be comforting or refreshing, but if we’re not, we’re lukewarm. That’s possible—but it’s not necessarily what I think.

Or you could say it’s spiritual temperature. Is Jesus pulling away from the idea that hot is good and cold is good? Maybe He’s just saying, “I wish you were either completely for Me or completely against Me, but because you’re in the middle it’s repulsive to Me.” I think that has some merit.

Others have said we should take what He says next, “You think you have need of nothing. You think your spiritually fine, but in reality you’re spiritually bankrupt. You have some of the hot, the good—maybe the religion you have—but in reality you’re destitute and have nothing. You’ve taken some of the hot water and some of the cold water, yet there’s this dangerous middle ground where you think you’re okay, but you’re not.” So that’s the lukewarmness.

Let’s just take all of those and acknowledge that lukewarmness is bad. Lukewarmness in all of those cases communicates an apathy and indifference, a tepidness. What Jesus does next is, I think, more helpful. Because if that was all we had, we’d be left with a very subjective sense: “I want to be hot, but I’m not quite there yet—so I just need more.” That in and of itself could be helpful or convicting, but I think Jesus actually clarifies what it is that led them to this apathy and indifference.

That is what He says next in verse 17: “*I will spit you out of my mouth for,*” or because, “*you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.*” Lukewarm Christianity comes from a false sense of self-sufficiency. We start to believe that we’re okay. We have enough. We’ve prospered. We need nothing. That’s what we say, or we think, or that’s the way we live, but in reality we are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.

Jesus here is condemning them for spiritual pride that says, “I don’t need God. I’m okay on my own.” Another indication that lukewarmness is talking about some sort of indifference or apathy is that His call to them is going to be to repentance and zeal. Jesus desires fervency, and the apathy, indifference or coasting is the fruit of a root problem: their prosperity has made them feel like they need nothing more.

Let’s meditate for a moment on things that could lead us to that place. Historians tell us that Laodicea was a financially prosperous city, and we certainly are prosperous as well. Few in this room might say, “I’m rich,” since we don’t feel that, but if we step back and think about what we have. What is it in our lives that would cause us to have a sense of desperate need? If we need food, we go to the refrigerator or pantry, and if those are low we go to the grocery store or McDonald’s. Food is readily accessible to us.

We sit in here and it's at best one degree outside, yet we're very comfortable. We're not worried about frost bite. We're not worried about hypothermia. We're sitting here, it's warm and that need is met.

We rest—sometimes too much—in our retirement accounts and insurance plans. We really can go through life in prosperity, needing nothing—or at least believing, “I'm actually okay. I'm able to coast through this life and rest in my own ability to manipulate finances and be able to provide for myself and my family.” That can cause us, like Laodicea, to feel like we've prospered and need nothing.

Another application of this would be that this could come as a spiritual temptation. Consider the similarities between the message to Laodicea and the message to Ephesus. We can feel, like Ephesus, “Because I know the right things about God and I'm doing some good things, I'm spiritually okay. I'm doing alright.” It lulls us into sleep and can lead to apathy because we feel as though, generally speaking, we're not as bad as other people and we're doing okay.

Or we might apply this to our church as a whole. We can become comfortable with where we are and what we're doing. Over the last few months it's become more clear to me—and I'm convicted about this—that as I talk to missionaries, I often want to hear the great things they're doing as they are reaching out and taking the gospel to people.

Or even closer to home, I've talked with Dave DeHaan about New City Church and those who went with them. “Okay, what are you doing? How are you reaching your city? What are your plans to see the gospel go forward in Elgin?” We know they need enthusiasm. Church plants need to be hot to survive. But what does New Covenant need to survive? Sometimes we can be lulled into comfort and just coast. We feel like we're rich, have prospered and need nothing.

But it's dangerous. It's dangerous for us as a church and individually to begin to become comfortable with a false sense of self-sufficiency. We're not self-sufficient. No one is. But we can get that false sense, and it leads to what Jesus described in the previous verses: neither hot nor cold, just lukewarm. And He says it's repulsive and He will spit them out of His mouth.

I think it would be helpful now to think about who Jesus is talking about. We know He's talking to a church in Laodicea, but it's difficult to imagine that what He just said about spitting them out of His mouth is the way He's going to treat His true children. That would lead us to think He's talking about people in a church who have never truly been born again. They may just be going through motions—just a religion.

You may come to a service on Sundays, yet have never truly been gripped with your need to trust only in Jesus Christ. You've never been gripped with an understanding of your own sin,

standing before God with a sense of needing Him, knowing Jesus died for you and trusting in Him, then living for Him. So maybe lukewarm Christians aren't real Christians at all. Maybe they're people who think they're okay, but in reality they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.

The only difficulty with that is what He says next. In verse 19 Jesus says, *“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.”* That sounds like He's talking to His church, talking to His children, those who truly have been born again. So these aren't words of wrath here. These are words that say, “I love you, so I'm going to reprove you and discipline you and bring you back.”

So I think—as is often true in Scripture—this is a message to all of us. Perhaps you've never been truly born again and your whole life is characterized by apathy and indifference toward God, resting in your own self-sufficiency. Or perhaps you're a true follower of God. You're fervently in love with Him, yet at times have drifted into seasons of self-sufficiency. Either way, the message that Jesus gives is this: be zealous and repentant.

Going back to verse 18, He says, *“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.”* Many Bibles have a note here that points to a similar passage in Isaiah 55. It's a call similar to when Jesus says, *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28). It's a call to come to Christ.

Isaiah 55:1-3, 7 says:

*Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David...*

*Let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;*

*let him return to the Lord,
that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

This call to come and buy gold from the Lord—or in the previous passage, wine and milk and bread that will truly satisfy—is similar to what Jesus said in John 6:35: *“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”* Jesus says to come to Him, expressing your need for Him and Him alone, and He will truly satisfy. He will meet these needs. Although these people feel physically and financially rich, He says to them, “You need true riches.” Although they feel they are clothed with fine robes, He says, “In reality, you are naked and your shame is exposed. So come to Me for white garments that will clothe you, robes of righteousness.”

Then He says, “Come to Me and I will open your eyes so that you can see. I will give you a salve, a medicine, that will open your eyes to see beyond just the temporal things of this world. You will see eternal riches and truths.” He’s saying, “Come to Me. Those whom I love I reprove and discipline.” So be zealous, fervent, expressing your need for Christ, and repent.

How do we do that? In verse 20 He says, *“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.”* This is a picture of eating with and experiencing close fellowship with Christ. So the way we buy from Him gold refined by fire so we can be rich, the way we are clothed with His robes, the way our eyes are opened is by hearing the voice of Jesus and opening wide that door, saying, “Jesus, I desperately need You. I will not depend on myself and my own works, my own riches, my own comfortable life. I need Jesus.”

Again, this passage seems to apply to both someone who does this for the very first time, who says, “Jesus, I need You to rescue me” —and to those who are already His children and say, “Jesus, I need You; every hour I need You.” So there’s a promise here for those who come to Him in repentance, that we will have fellowship with Christ. Then verse 21 says, *“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.”*

So there’s a future promise here as well of some kind of co-rule with Christ—that we will be near Him in fellowship and that we will rule with Him. Even as He conquered—an obvious reference back to His death and the conquering of death and sin on the cross—He sits down to rule and reign. He says, “You will be part of this, too.” Each of these letters talks about this, about overcoming and conquering. It seems the way we do that as followers of Christ is humble,

repentant faith. Then He says, *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

How do we know if we are lukewarm? How do we know if we can be described as someone who says, “I’m rich, I’m prosperous, and I need nothing”? My guess is none of us say those words. I thought this quote from a message John Piper preached was helpful:

The lukewarm are spiritually self-satisfied. To find out whether you are among that number, don’t look into your head to see if you think that you are needy. Rather, look at your prayer life.

It doesn’t matter what we think in our head. The test of whether we are in bondage to spiritual self-satisfaction is how earnest and frequent and extended our prayers for change are. It’s not just if we can answer properly on a test or if we would say we need God, but do our lives demonstrate that we believe we need God? I think this takes it away from just the mental exercise of asking, “Would I ever say that?” Probably we would say no. But, “Does my life demonstrate my desperation for Him? Do I believe I’m not sufficient on my own?”

One of the ways a believer acknowledges and expresses that is by crying out and saying, “God, I need You. Change me. Use me. Use my ransomed life in any way You choose.” This also takes it away from the purely subjective emotionalism of, “Do I feel like I’m fiery for God right now, or do I feel a little more lethargic?” Sometimes that feeling can be very subjective, almost manipulative. A real way to evaluate ourselves is by using this metric: am I crying out to God, expressing my need for Him, or does my life demonstrate that I think I have need of nothing?

As we come to the Lord’s Table, I want to give you another quote. I’ve been listening to a biography of the German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In a sermon from around 1928, he was describing the church’s temptation to drift into nominal Christianity, where we add Jesus to the rest of our otherwise normal lives.

Of course we build Him a temple, but we live in our own houses. Religion has been exiled to Sunday morning, to a place into which one gladly withdraws for a couple of hours, but only to get back to one’s place of work immediately afterward. One cannot give Him a small compartment of our spiritual life, but must give Him everything—or nothing. The religion of Christ is not a tidbit after one’s bread. On the contrary, it is the bread—or it is nothing.

Jesus is either our whole life, or He’s nothing. We can’t just add Him to an otherwise self-sufficient life, a life that otherwise looks like normal living with some church or religion added to it. To be a follower of Christ means to say, “He is everything to me.”

As we come to this Communion Table, if you're here and you're trusting in Christ, when you eat that bread and drink that cup you're remembering what Jesus did for you. But you're also saying, "I need You." Jesus is the Bread of Life, and when we come to Him we will never hunger and never thirst. Spiritually speaking we will be satisfied by Him alone.

The call Jesus gives to those whom He loves is to be zealous and repent. Remember that He reproves and disciplines those whom He loves so if God is bringing things to your mind right now where you've begun to become indifferent, to coast, to live as though you're self-sufficient, repent of that. Confess that to God, trusting in His forgiveness.

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