

22 April 2007

“Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church that the Lord Continued to Love”

Reading: Revelation 3:14-22

Just how would you describe your own spiritual condition? Most of us are all too aware of our shortcomings and would be hesitant to speak in glowing terms. Even if we don't doubt that we *are* Christians, we don't always *feel* Christian. We are aware of the allure of the world around us and of our own tendency towards spiritual lethargy. We don't always feel that we are (to use an old cliché) “on fire for God.”

So, when we hear the message to the church at Laodicea, we take a direct hit. The Lord's words come like a sledgehammer smashing into our contentment and shattering our complacency. Apparently the Lord, who knows everything, saw no redeeming feature in this church. He spoke no word of commendation to it. And, as we consider our own condition, his words may even fill us with foreboding.

But let me say, up front, that I find this *the* most encouraging of the seven messages. “Ellis,” you say, “Are you out to lunch? This is a message in which the Lord tells his children that they make him so sick that he threatens to reject them. How can you possibly find that encouraging?”

Let me explain. Yes, they were in a bad way. And yes, they were so deceived that they were totally unaware of it. Yes, the Lord says that their spiritual condition has a nauseating effect on him and that he is about to spit them out of his mouth. But he also assures them of his love. There is a remedy to the situation and the Lord tells them what it is. He is, in fact, extremely encouraging. And, without in the least minimizing the problem, that is where my emphasis will be this morning.

I AS ALWAYS, GOD SPEAKS RIGHT INTO OUR SITUATION

- A. He knows your address; he understands your circumstances and he is acutely aware of where you are spiritually.
- B. Nowhere is this more evident than in the message before us. As we shall see, the Lord speaks to the Laodiceans, as he does to us, in terms that would really connect. A few pertinent facts about the city and the church will help us to see this.
 - 1. Laodicea was an extremely affluent city. It was one of a cluster of three cities in the fertile valley of the river Lycus (the other two were Colossae and Hierapolis). It was renowned for its prosperity and its opulence. The Laodiceans tended to be self-sufficient and smug. In AD 60, when an earthquake devastated the whole region, the city was promptly rebuilt without any appeal to the Roman senate for the customary subsidy.¹ They could handle it themselves, and handle it they did!

¹ William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1957), 111.

2. The second thing to note about the region is that it can get extremely hot. This is thirsty country. And, just across the way from Laodicea, in Hierapolis, are some hot mineral springs. On their way over the plateau they become lukewarm and they discharge themselves over the cliff right opposite Laodicea. When I visited the region some years ago, I knelt down cupped my hands and took a sip of that water. To this day it is tepid and unpleasant to the taste. You certainly don't want to swallow that lukewarm water.
3. The city was also known for its "rag trade." It was famous for a breed of black-woolled sheep. There was a kind of violet glossy darkness to their wool. This made the jet-black garments manufactured in the Laodicean factories sought-after items. We'll see the relevance of all this when we listen to what the Lord has to say to this church.
4. One more thing: the city was home to an esteemed medical school. This medical school had developed an eye-powder that was used to cure sore eyes. It was called the *Tephra Phrygia*, and it was even exported in tablet form. So, Laodicea was proud of its eye powder, as it was of its jet black garments.

C. Now, with these things in mind, just listen to what the Lord has to say to the Laodicean Christians.

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. ¹⁵I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

1. Firstly, it is not without significance that the Lord describes himself as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness." His perception of the condition of the Laodicean church was very different from their (own) self-perception. What he was about to say would come as a shock to them. So he reminds them that he is the Amen, the faithful and true witness. "Amen" means "it is just so," or "So let it be." He *is* the Truth and therefore what he says will be completely accurate.
2. Secondly, let me just say that the Greek words used here are rather catchy. I think they're worth mentioning: The Lord says: "You are neither *psuchros* (cold), nor *zestos* (hot); rather you are *chliaros* (lukewarm)." They have a sound to them, don't they?"
3. Thirdly, the word translated 'spit' literally means 'vomit.' In other words, the Lord is speaking to the church in terms that would be familiar to them. Almost all of the readers would, at one time or another, perhaps on a swelteringly hot day, have tried to drink that tepid, nauseating water and found it so distasteful that they had to spit it out.

- D. We have, of course to ask, “What might he say to us?” He would, no doubt, use different images, but would he need to portray a similar reality?

II WE, HERE, ARE PARTICULARLY SUSCEPTIBLE TO THE LAODICEAN MALADY

Let’s give it a name. Do you remember the word for “lukewarm” was “*chliaros*”? We could call it “chliaritis” or “chliaritic syndrome.” Let’s look at the symptoms.

- A. Here’s the important thing about chliaritic syndrome. *When you’ve got it, you may feel fine.* We know that there are times when we have a warm feeling. But your spiritual temperature is not gauged by the way you feel. Yes, of course, there should be affection and emotion; there should be love and feeling. But that’s not what the Lord was speaking about here.
- B. If you want to know the symptoms of this malady, all you have to do is to read on.

¹⁷You 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.

1. “I do not need a thing.” is likely to be the infamous last statement of any church or any Christian. Wealth and comfort so often lead to self-reliance and complacency. When it comes to matters spiritual, there can be no greater self-deception than the arrogance of self-sufficiency.
 2. The Lord says in effect: “You have pulled that (black) wool over your own eyes. You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor (destitute), blind and naked. That is the real state of affairs. Things are exactly the opposite from what they seem to you.”
- C. There is no need for us to feel guilty about our relative affluence. All things considered, Vancouver is rated as one of the best places in world to live. The Semiahmoo Peninsula takes a lot of beating. Compared to the vast majority of the world’s population, we live in luxury. We don’t need to feel guilty about that, but we do need to recognize how easily it can lead to apathy and conceit. Without even realizing it, we contract this deadly disease. Imperceptibly we succumb to “chliaritic syndrome,” otherwise known as lukewarmness.

John Stott makes a telling observation:

Perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to the church of the 21st century than this. It describes vividly the respectable, nominal, rather sentimental, skin-deep religiosity which is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity is flabby and anemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion.²

² John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 113.

Fortunately there is a cure for this malady.

III THE LORD SPEAKS FOUR WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO US

¹⁸I 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.

In the first place, he says:

A. “Here’s what I offer you.”

1. *“I counsel you . . .”* That is nothing short of amazing. He has described himself as “the ruler of God’s creation.” Again Stott makes a very pertinent remark as he expresses wonder at the Lord’s astonishing condescension:

I can never read this verse without being strangely moved. He is the great God of the expanding universe. He has countless galaxies of stars at his fingertips. The heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain him. He is the creator and sustainer of all things, the Lord God Almighty. He has the right to issue orders for us to obey. He prefers to give advice which we need not heed. He could command; he chooses to counsel. He respects the freedom with which he has ennobled us.³

2. *¹⁸I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich.*

The church had obviously conformed to the society in which it found itself. They thought they were rich but they were poverty-stricken. So the Lord advises them to procure from him true riches – “gold refined in the fire” – so that they can become genuinely rich.

3. *And white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness . . .*

Instead of those jet black garments, of which they were so proud, he offers them pure white clothes to cover their shameful nakedness.

4. *And salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.*

³ John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 116-117.

Instead of that powder for which your city is renowned, use the ointment I will give you and you will see things as they really are.

I wonder what imagery he would use to get our attention if he were speaking directly to us today. Would he allude to the natural beauty that surrounds us, to the sense of ease and security that is such a blessing to us but also constitutes a danger, to our hedonism, our social security and our complacency?

Whatever the precise imagery, his offer is still open to us. He promises us true riches, garments of righteousness and twenty-twenty spiritual vision.

He leaves us in no doubt about what he offers to us. But, even more importantly, he explains:

B. “Here’s why I am speaking to you.”

¹⁹Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.

Despite the fact that the Laodiceans are proud and self-deceived, the Lord reassures them of his love. When the Lord uses sharp words that seem to cut us to ribbons, it is not because he hates us but because he loves us. He administers bitter medicine because the malady is life-threatening! One of the few things of value that Eliphaz said to Job was this:

Blessed is the man whom God corrects’
So do not despise the discipline of the Almighty.
For he wounds, but he also binds up;
He injures but his hands also heal
(Job 5:17-18).

The Writer to the Hebrews concurs:

God disciplines us for our good, (so) that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it (Heb 12:10-11).

I know that corporal punishment is not popular nowadays, but I grew up in a bygone era, when it was still common. My father believed in periodically “applying the hand of wisdom to the seat of learning.” I can still remember one instance of drastic discipline. On my seventh birthday, I was given a bicycle. But the roads around our house were busy and dangerous, so I was forbidden, under any circumstances, to ride on them. One day I wheeled my bike to a friend’s house two doors away. He and I made a spur-of-the-moment decision to go fishing. That would entail riding about six kilometers, on those treacherous roads, to the mouth of the Umgeni River on the east

coast of South Africa. Well, our fishing expedition was unsuccessful -- what do you expect when you use chewing gum for bait?

When I arrived home, I found an apprehensive father waiting for me. He calmly asked me where I had been. "To Alec's house," I replied, but I suspected I was in big trouble. "Were you there all the time," he inquired. I had to decide quickly. "At Alec's house," was a half truth, but now I had to tell a blatant lie – and I did.

I was sent to my bedroom. It was not long before my dad entered brandishing a miniature cricket bat. It was about eighteen inches long and it was one of my valued possessions. It contained signatures of my heroes, the South African cricket team. And it was about to become the instrument of correction. That was the worst hiding I had ever received. When he had finished, my father stood there looking at me. "*That* was for disobeying us," he said. Did it sting? It seemed so hard and it seemed to go on forever. Then, after a brief pause, while I was still smarting from that chastening, my father said, "*This* is for lying to me!" The second hiding felt worse than the first. And, to add insult to injury, it was with my treasured cricket bat.

My father stood there looking at me. I wondered what I could possibly have done to warrant a *third* hiding. He sat down and said, "Come here, my boy." Then, as he looked me right in the eye, I saw the emotion on his face. "Why do you think I did that," he asked. By this time, I was sobbing. I think he was almost crying too. "It's because I don't want you dead," he said. "We love and we don't want you to get hurt."

Perhaps I should have just kept quiet, but though the tears I was going to get a word in. "But Alec is allowed . . ." That's as far as I got. "Alec is not my son," he said, "but you *are!*"

The Writer to the Hebrews puts it plainly: "Go is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?" (Heb 12:7). God says to the Laodiceans: "Now that I have got your attention, let me assure you of my love." The time to worry is when you no longer feel the Lord's discipline. If he is challenging you about your lukewarmness, as only he can, it is because he loves you and he cares.

This brings us to the most amazing statement of all.

C. **"Here's how earnest I am!"**

The Lord paints a picture that is both tragic and beautiful.

²⁰ "*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.*"

Imagine, the Lord himself said, "I will build *my* church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Mt 16:18). Paul tells us that "Christ loved the church and gave

himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). It is *his* church. He purchased it, he established it; he sustains it. And here he is -- outside! This is the ruler of God’s creation and the supreme head of the church, and he is excluded. That is *tragic*.

But it is also *beautiful*. He has not gone away. He knocks. He asks admission and he promises to restore our fellowship with him.

Look at what he offers: true wealth, garments of righteousness and the ability to see things as they really are. Look at why he speaks to us: it is because he loves us and will let allow us to go down the path of spiritual ruin. Look at how earnest he is; he stands at the door and knocks. He doesn’t need us but he seeks our company. And now he says . . .

D. **“Look what I have in mind for you.”**

²¹To 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.

That is a most amazing promise. Can it be? It is one thing to be saved by him, but are we destined to *rule* with him? When we hear it in these terms, it almost sounds too much. But this is not the first time we encounter the thought. Paul describes us as “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom 8:17). He reminds Timothy that “if we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim 2:12).

Conclusion

Ours is a high calling and it rightly demands wholeheartedness. Think of it. We make the most amazing claims about our Saviour. We believe he is unique. He had provided a perfect and complete salvation. We know that he gives us abundant life. “Lukewarmness” is the most eloquent denial of those claims. How can we say all this about Jesus and then insult him with an insipid apathy that nauseates him and grieves him? And, on top of that, it suggests to our neighbors that we don’t mean a word we say about him?

That’s certainly not how it should be. And that’s not how it needs to be. In among these great assurances there is a word of appeal:

*¹⁹Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. **So be earnest, and repent.***

It’s time to renounce your half-heartedness.

I don’t know if you have seen a print of the Homan Hunt’s painting that depicts Jesus standing at the door knocking.⁴ If you have, you may have noticed that there is no door handle on the outside. He will not barge in. If you have been self-reliant or complacent, if, instead of zeal and wholeheartedness, there has been an anemic apathy, you have effectively excluded him. But his invitation still stands:

⁴ The original painting, The Light of the World, is now in the chapel at Keble College, Oxford, with a later copy in St Paul’s Cathedral.

²⁰*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.*