

All Things New: Be Earnest!
By Jason Huff
November 17, 2019
Joshua 24:14-15; Hebrews 12:5-16; Revelation 3:14-22

Our final Scripture reading today is Revelation 3:14-22. May God bless the reading of His perfect, holy, and sacred Word. “[Jesus 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.'”

Sometimes, what we have, no matter how much of it we have, is not what we need. I remember a year or two back when I filled up my tank at the local Meijer, got home, and when I went to start up the car again, nothing! They'd switched the fuel at the pump and now I had a tankful of diesel that had to be cleaned out of my car's system. Thankfully, Meijer paid for it all. But here's the thing – I had a full tank of gas, right? But it was useless. Unless your car runs on diesel, diesel fuel is worthless.

So many things are like that. Hundred dollar tickets to a concert in the wrong city. All the fixings for Thanksgiving dinner but no oven. A phone with no signal – we've all had that one, right? It's not that we have nothing, it's that we have nothing we need in the moment that actually matters. And while money can be useful, there are an awful lot of situations that can't be fixed with it either – usually the most important ones like relationships.

Today's passage is the final letter that Jesus has John write to the churches in the province of Asia, and it's a doozy. Laodicea was a church with diesel in the tank – they had what they thought they needed, but the engine was about to die and a difficult cleanup needed to happen. Jesus has no kind words for them, but He calls them out in terms they could easily understand. If we can learn from this letter, we can avoid the condemnation they received.

Now Laodicea was a pretty nice place to live in the second half of the first century, at least by worldly standards. It was known across the Roman Empire as the home of ophthalmology. People would come a very long way to be treated, and the eye medicine they made was apparently quite effective for many eye ailments.

It was also a crazy wealthy city. You might remember a couple of weeks ago, we talked about how an earthquake leveled the city of Philadelphia around 17AD. Philadelphia got boatloads of aid from the Emperor, but they never fully recovered. In 62AD, probably within 20 years of the writing of Revelation, an earthquake devastated Laodicea. But when the Emperor offered assistance in rebuilding, the Laodiceans said, “We’re good.” They rebuilt the whole city themselves. Commerce was good and business was thriving.

The only thing about Laodicea that wasn’t great was the water supply. It was known for being pretty rank. Hierapolis nearby was known for its healing hot springs; Colossae was known for its cold, refreshing waters. But Laodicea’s waters were brackish, like muddy pond water. It was disgusting, and some writers suggest they imported water rather than to drink the water nearby. All of these things come into play in this letter.

Jesus addresses Laodicean as “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.” The word “Amen” is originally from Hebrew, not Greek, and it’s an adjective meaning “true” or an adverb meaning “truly.” Here, the word is transformed into a noun. Jesus is the One who is Truth. He embodies truth. There’s the additional explanation that He is the faithful and true witness because to use the word this way is rare. He’s also the eternal truth, the word “Amen” going back to the original language of God’s people. And He rules the whole earth. All of these names for Jesus are to impress upon the Laodiceans the reality of their situation – that as painful as it will be to hear, this is the hard truth.

The Laodicean church is neither hot nor cold. Many English commentaries think that Jesus wants them to be hot or cold in our own culture’s understanding of hot and cold – that we either be on fire for the Lord, excited about what He’s doing and engaging fully in His plans for us, or that we be cold for Him – not interested, unbelieving, and not pretending to be otherwise. But I cannot wrap my head around the idea that God ever wants anyone to be “cold” in that way.

Instead, Jesus is talking to the Laodiceans from their own context. They know that hot water is good; it can bring rest; it can be healing. We like our coffee hot, our tea hot, especially when we have a fall that’s turned into winter. Cold drinks are refreshing; in the midst of summer, there’s nothing better. The Laodiceans knew just how awful lukewarm water was. Not good for bathing, not good for drinking, not good for anything! It’s just...yuck!

Jesus calls the Laodiceans and their deeds “lukewarm.” It doesn’t mean that they did nothing; it’s that what they did had no real meaning or purpose. There are lots of ways to bless God and bless other people; they are refreshing in different ways – hot and cold – but they still are effective. One church fills Operation Christmas Child boxes; another has a food pantry; a third gets out and does car washes in the community. If they are doing these deeds with a passion to let others know about the love of Jesus, all good! No one church can do everything; no one good deed is better than all the others. It’s whatever God has placed on those believers’ hearts to do. But the Laodiceans didn’t do that. They were stagnant, just like their water. And because of that stagnancy, Jesus warns that He will spit them out of His mouth. If they don’t make a turnaround, there will be judgment on that church.

We have seen God's judgment on the lukewarm church even in our own era. Churches that exist for themselves, that exist for the members to have a place to socialize, where you "do your duty" and show up for an hour (but not a minute more!), where you go to be seen and noticed, where Bible study takes a back seat to book club and the pastor is the person we hire to do our ministry for us – those churches are dying, and good riddance!

To be honest, the reason that we are here today as a new church is because the church we came from had a lot of lukewarm people that didn't want the heat to get turned up. One person left because, as they put it, "the Bible said it, and you preached it – I just don't believe it." Another family left because we decided elders needed to be able to talk about their faith in Jesus. More than one decided the church "wasn't meeting their needs." Now as a new pastor fresh out of seminary, I made a ton of mistakes – an absolute ton. Plenty of blame can fall on me. But better to be in a Weight Watchers where we can talk about Jesus and welcome the Holy Spirit in and honor the Father than in a building where faith was all but dead! And I am so glad that over five years later, God has honored our desire to be something more than lukewarm.

Back to the Laodiceans. "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."

The Laodiceans looked around them and said, "Things are pretty good!" There was no persecution to report. No poverty striking the worshippers. No false teachers stirring up the pot. In fact, the weekly offering looked great! Maybe they could build a center of worship; maybe they already had; maybe they'd left behind the house church idea. They had plenty. "God is blessing us with prosperity because of our love for Him. We have all this wealth so that we can relax and sit back and enjoy the peace of our Lord and Savior, right?"

WRONG. Jesus is adamant – the Laodiceans have NOTHING. They are in far worse shape than any other church in the region, and not because of lousy teaching or persecution or even backsliding into sin. They are in desperate shape because they have stopped relying on God. They're lying in a spiritual hammock snoozing away and there are people who desperately need to hear the gospel, who need encouragement, who need peace, who need a Savior, who need His hope, His love, His mercy. They are a disgrace!

Jesus says, "Come to me and get what you really need. Get the gold refined in the fire – get my spiritual wealth of knowledge and wisdom that has been tested and all impurities burned away. Get my white clothes – get dressed in spiritual purity, because right now your shameful lack of concern for me and my ways is apparent for all to see. You think you need the eye cure that Laodicea has? Come to me and get relief from your spiritual blindness."

The lesson of Laodicea, more than any other, is the destructiveness of pride, complacency, and self-sufficiency. The Laodiceans thought they could take care of themselves. They had the money and resources to assume that they could make it on their own. The things their city was known for were the things causing the church to self-destruct.

The perils facing the Laodicean church are the ones most dangerous to the American church. Because our culture once celebrated the church, it was easy to get comfortable. A lot of churches have had to make hard financial decisions in recent years, but others are rolling in money. Not very long ago, if you had enough money and resources to buy equipment, send out enough mailers, and blanket enough neighborhoods, if you had a big enough startup group, you could start up a church without a lot of spiritual effort, without a lot of prayer and passion.

Some older churches lasted a generation or longer running off of the endowments of their deceased members, sometimes long after the church had any spiritual vibrancy at all. We trusted in cash, not the work of the Holy Spirit, to keep our doors open. People stopped looking to expand the Kingdom with new converts and started looking to expand the bottom line by having more members in seats.

We might think, “Well, we don’t have the problem of too much money at CrossWay,” and you’d be right! But it doesn’t mean that pride and complacency haven’t gotten in the door. Because it’s not hard to think, “Well, the pastor’s teaching good theology, and I usually get something out of the service that makes my week better, I like seeing my friends on Sundays and our special events, I genuinely believe in Jesus and know He saved me from my sin, so I’m pretty happy with the way things are.” None of those things are bad at all! And yet we desperately need a sense of divine discontent.

What is divine discontent? Divine discontent is not being satisfied with the spiritual status quo. It’s knowing that God has so much more for us than what we’ve experienced in the past. It’s knowing that God didn’t save our souls merely to squeak us into heaven when we die but to transform us into His Kingdom’s citizens in this life. It’s knowing that God will bring many, many more people into His Kingdom and has asked us to co-operate with the Spirit so they will learn of Jesus’ great love for them. It’s knowing that God has an abundant life for us that we’re not fully experiencing because we are not fully surrendered to Him, and wanting that to change. Divine discontent is spurred on by the Spirit so that we will not be satisfied with anything less than God’s full plan for us.

Last week, I was at a conference called “Growing the Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit.” It wasn’t about church growth, about building numbers. It was about helping churches explore what it means to be in step with the Holy Spirit, listening for His guidance and experiencing the great variety of gifts that we see New Testament believers receiving from the Spirit. The conference is run by folks in Presbyterian and Reformed churches, so it’s not way out there. It was about exploring the biblical basis for these gifts and how to make room for the Holy Spirit to work in unexpected ways.

You may have seen some small changes today because of it; you will likely see more small changes in the future. But one of the biggest things it opened up to me was the world of things the Holy Spirit is willing to do in us and through us that we are unwilling to allow Him to do. I realized that I know a lot of theology, but in experiencing the fullness of what the Holy Spirit is willing to do, I’m pretty ignorant. I’ve realized I’ve often closed myself to really listening to what the Holy Spirit has to say, for His guidance and direction. And I don’t want to do that anymore.

Sometimes we are unwilling for the Spirit to work because we're afraid, but much of it is our complacency. What if we were called to pray regularly for our community, to intercede on behalf of other churches and other believers, and then to get out there and help out? Sounds like a lot of work. What if word got out that when we prayed for healing a few months ago, someone actually got healed? Don't want to sound like one of those weird churches. And on the list goes until the only things folks are willing to do are things that sound fun rather than hard. But God didn't call us to do fun stuff – though serving alongside one another and ministering to others together can be a lot of fun. He called us to become His ambassadors to a lost and hurting world. Laodicea's complacency and self-sufficiency can sound a lot like us.

But here's the thing: even in His hard words, Jesus speaks encouragement. "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline." If He did not love us, if He did not care about us becoming like Him and knowing the joy of being in the center of the Father's will, He wouldn't do the hard work of getting us back on track and telling it like it is. Any parent here understands this. We love our kids, which is why we set limits, why we tell them "no" sometimes, why we make it clear when they've messed up, why we punish occasionally – we want the very best for them. Jesus wants the best for us, so we have to hear the truth of our complacency and our arrogance.

Jesus tells them how to fix what is wrong: "Be earnest, and repent." This word "earnest" in Greek means more than sincerity; it means to have zeal, fire in your bones for something, to seek something with all you are. It's the opposite of complacency and disinterest. Jesus says, "Turn away from your indifference and apathy and self-satisfaction and put your heart into following me!"

"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." Oh, church, for us to stop putting our fingers in our ears that we might hear Jesus' call! Oh, church, for us to stop with any excuses and throw the door open wide to Jesus! He is knocking now, but He will not knock forever. May we abandon our own plans and ambitions and schedules and get on board with His! We don't want to be spit out lukewarm. We want to please our Lord, and to do that, we must regain our zeal for Him, our desire for Him to rule every part of our lives.

"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." If we have any doubts that the lowest of the low can be elevated to the highest of the high by Jesus, this should get rid of them. This church that Jesus has just disciplined, He assures can overcome and receive the right to sit with Him on His throne, reigning beside Him. The person who gets over their complacency, who is willing to follow Jesus rather than to try to take the lead with their cash or personal strengths, will in eternity have genuine authority rather than the earthly authority that fades when the money runs out or their popularity fades.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." May we hear this message and obey it. May we not let anything convince us that we have it made, that we've nothing further to learn and no need to grow with Christ. The world of God's love is just beginning to unfold before us – may we become willing learners at the feet of Jesus, our teacher and Savior.