

October 20, 2024

Revelation 3:14-22

This is the last week of our series on Jesus' letters to the seven churches in seven cities in what is now Western Turkey. As you can see, Jesus doesn't give the same letter to each one- they each have their own temptations, struggles, gifts, weaknesses, and therefore different criticisms, compliments, and encouragements from Jesus. Ephesus was the doctrinally sound, but unloving church. Smyrna was the suffering, but spiritually rich church. Pergamum and Thyatira were the loving, but overly-tolerant churches. Sardis was the active, busy, but dead church. Last week, we talked about the church in Philadelphia, the struggling but faithful church. Today, Jesus addresses the church in Laodicea, which I would characterize as the **Rich (but poor), clothed (but naked), healthy (but blind) church. And Jesus is going to tell them 1. Their Symptoms, 2. Their Disease, and 3. The Cure.**

1. Their Symptoms. Laodicea as a city wasn't very close to a good water source, so they had an aqueduct bring in water from a hot spring about five miles away- so when the water got into the city, it was, quite frankly, disgusting. Lukewarm, tepid, like drinking water from a hot tub that's been off for a few hours. Jesus then says to the church in Laodicea- that's *you*. Neither hot nor cold. Just lukewarm. What does he mean by that? Well, the New Testament uses words like this to describe the spiritual state in one's heart. Hot, which is the word they use for "zealous," means that the Christian is on fire for Jesus. They are devout- they feel the sting of their sin and are passionate about repenting and the good news of Jesus brings them so much joy and they can't help sharing it with whoever will listen- they love reading their Bible, they love worshiping, they're on fire for Jesus! Cold, then, would be the opposite. Rebellious toward God- a person who's "cold" wants nothing to do with Jesus or his rules or his truth because that person hates him. This church was neither. They weren't worshipping false gods. They weren't committing adultery. But they also weren't on fire for Jesus. They heard the sermons, they said the prayers, they sang the hymns, they were decent, nice, okay people. But they had no joy. They had no passion. They didn't really care- they weren't moved by the threats of Hell and when they heard about Jesus' forgiveness, they probably thought, "That's nice." And Jesus isn't just angry or concerned, he's disgusted. Look at what this says to these people, "I am going to vomit you out of my mouth. You disgust me. You make me sick. You nauseate me. You turn my stomach. Yuck." "I wish you were either hot or cold!" It makes sense that Jesus would rather have these Christians be hot and zealous and passionate rather than lukewarm and indifferent, but look at what he says! "I wish you were either hot *or* cold." Is he seriously saying to these Christians that he'd rather them reject his word, hate him, and rebel against him with malice in their hearts than be the way they are now? *Yes.*

As a pastor, the easiest people to work with are the ones with hearts on fire for Jesus- they want to study the Bible, they want to worship, they want to serve, they're thankful, they're faithful in worship- clearly that's easy and fun to work with. Do you know who is also enjoyable to work

with? Cold people. Unbelievers who are angry at God, angry at the church, angry with the Bible, and are wrong about a lot of things- I can work with that. Because if they're so angry with God, it means they care. Do you know who's impossible to work with? People who don't really care. Christians who don't wrestle with difficult teachings in the Scriptures because they either don't read or don't care. Christians who come to the sacrament, but aren't penitent, aren't weighed down by guilt, and therefore aren't filled with joy when they hear that their sins are forgiven because apparently there's nothing to forgive. Christians who hear the sermons and say, "sounds good." What can you say to that? The truth- Jesus is disgusted and there is a fatal disease at work.

2. The Disease. You may notice this- Jesus sometimes lays on a bandage to comfort sinners, but sometimes he needs to use a scalpel and it often hurts, and that's what Jesus is doing now, and he's bitterly ironic about it. The city of Laodicea was a very wealthy, industrious, independent city and they were proud of it. A few decades before this was written, the city was destroyed by an earthquake, and the government in Rome would often give money and resources to cities who had been devastated like this, but Laodicea had refused the funding because they insisted they didn't need anyone's help- and this shocked the Romans- no one did that- but because Laodicea was so wealthy, they could, and they were proud of it. Laodicea was famous for having sheep with black wool which made these beautiful, glossy, black clothes. Laodicea was also famous for this eye salve that could heal all kinds of eye conditions. And this prideful mindset had crept into his church. Jesus says, "You think you're rich and clothed and healthy, you think you're self sufficient and you don't need a thing- don't you see how pitiful and wretched and poor you are, how dependent you are on me for everything you have- every breath you take? Don't you see how poor you are, that your gold and silver will rot in the ground and can't help you when you face death? Don't you see how naked you are? You're naked in a way that even the most chic clothing can't hide you- your guilt before a holy God because he sees everything you've done and said and thought. Don't you see? No! You don't! Because even with all your eye medication and balm you are blind to see how lost you really are!"

There's a movie called, "God's Not Dead," and in it there's a conversation between a greedy, vicious, cutthroat business tycoon who is incredibly wealthy and has everything he could ever want, and he visits his dying mother, a devout Christian, whose dementia is so severe she can't recognize anyone, she just sits there and stares off into space. In the scene, the son says, "*You prayed and believed your whole life. Never done anything wrong. And here you are. You're the nicest person I know. I am the meanest. You have dementia. My life is perfect. Explain that to me!*" She, to his surprise, says this: *Sometimes the devil allows people to live a life free of trouble because he doesn't want them turning to God. Their sin is like a jail cell, except it is all nice and comfy and there doesn't seem to be any reason to leave. The door's wide open. Till one day, time runs out, and the cell door slams shut, and suddenly it's too late.* That's exactly what was happening to the church in Laodicea. Why were these people so lukewarm? Why didn't they beg

forgiveness from Jesus? Why didn't they cry out to God for mercy like we all should? Why didn't they embrace the news of Jesus' death for them and find joy in Jesus' promise that he was always with them? Because they didn't need to. They were fooled by their wealth into thinking that, really, they were in control of their lives and they didn't really need God to provide for them. They were fooled by their relatively moral lives into thinking that they weren't just as desperate as anyone else for Jesus' mercy- which is why they didn't really care when they heard about it. How do you wake someone up like that? You have to offend them and tell them how bad it really is? And my prayer is that some of you are offended by this sermon- I don't know who, but someone here probably has been blinded to their true condition and they need to be made aware of how disgusting they are, their disease, and the cure.

3. The Cure. Again, Jesus doesn't come to this sick church with a command, but a comfort and an invitation. Jesus doesn't offend his people because it brings him a sick joy. He hurt them for the sake of them. Look- those whom I love, and the word for "love" he uses isn't the normal one- it's *phileo*, which is a close, intimate love that denotes deep, personal friendship- that's who he rebukes and disciplines. Jesus is your friend! Of course he's your God! But he's a God who willingly died for you, even though all of us were disgusting to him because of our sin, all of us were shamefully naked, although all of us were wretched and blind and impoverished- nothing to offer him, Jesus saved us. Jesus became poor, so poor and wretched that people laughed at his cries for mercy as he was being tortured and killed. Jesus was stripped naked, both physically, but spiritually as he was punished and exposed as if he had committed every sin that we had. Jesus was made poor so we could be eternally rich- equipped to endure all the things in life, the sickness, the deaths, the rejections, the failures that money really can't help with. Jesus was made naked so we could be clothed, not with earthly clothes, but with the clothes that can actually cover the nakedness Adam and Eve were trying to hid in the garden- guilt and shame before a holy God- so you and I can stand unashamed, perfect, and blameless before God himself. Jesus says, come and get it. It's free. I earned it for you! Take it! It's yours. "Let me in." Jesus doesn't just want your money, or your prayers, or an hour on Sunday. He wants your heart. He wants you not just to know about him, but to know him. The God of Heaven and Earth wants to eat with you, to have fellowship with you. He wants to enjoy your company, and you his. You see, the church in Laodicea were doing the right things on paper- going to church, giving offerings, not committing any horrible sins- but why? It wasn't to get closer to Jesus, but to get Jesus off their backs- to keep him at arm's length. If they pressed the right religious buttons, Jesus would bless them, but not challenge them or convict them or change them. My friends, let him challenge you, disagree with you, convict you, comfort you, and change you. C.S. Lewis says it like this: *"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house*

from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.” Jesus only says things that hurt to save you from yourself, but also to form you into who he calls you to be.

I'll end with this. Look at what Jesus says- he's the ruler over all creation. He is faithful and true. And in the beginning, so was Adam and Eve. They walked at his side and all of creation was theirs- Adam gets to name the animals. But what happened, they fell into sin, and immediately they realized they were naked and hid from God because they were guilty. Here, Jesus promises them and us that in the end he will mend this for good, and we will sit at his side on his glorious throne in Heaven- ruling the new world at his side- robed in such a way that we will never feel shame again. That's what he has in store for us. If he has to offend us once in a while to stop us from throwing it away, to save us from ourselves, if he has to have us experience hardships so we don't grow too in love with this fallen, decaying world, he will gladly do so if it means that we dwell, eat, dance, celebrate, reign with him forever. Amen.