

Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church

LL&L

Revelation 3:14-22

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Introduction

Tim. Pastor. **Revelation 3:14-22. Pray.**

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who you could just tell was not listening? Maybe they were distracted or disinterested, but you had sort of “is this thing on?” sort of moment?

- You strike up conversation at a party with someone and you're trying to maintain eye contact, but their eyes just keep scanning around the room seeing who else they can talk to?
- Or you're trying to have a conversation with your spouse and the kids are running around screaming and so you're like half talking, half making sure they don't destroy everything around them?
- Or you're having coffee with a friend who is having a bad day and you're asking questions, trying to engage and it's just one word answers coming back - yes, no, yes, no.
- Or maybe you're on that first date and you realize 10 minutes in “this ain't it.” And so you start wondering – what do I need to do to not offend them but to make sure they know I am not interested.

I often find myself as the one guilty of this. I am a huge internal processor and very scattered brain – so my brain is always turning and turning, thinking about 4 or 5 different things at once.

Just this week Garrison told me – “Do you know it takes me 2-3 tries to get through a story when I'm talking to you?”

And so I find myself often being the one who is patiently asked by Lindsay – “Hey, are you hearing what I'm saying? Are you listening to me?”

“Are you listening to me?”

We are in our final week in our series on the letters from Jesus to the 7 churches in Revelation. And we've been exploring these letters seeing how each one asks a sort of gut-check question from Jesus to these churches.

But today, the letter to Laodicea, is sort of the question underneath all of the questions. Here is God, saying to the church at Laodicea and to us – **“Hey, are you listening to me?” Did you hear anything I've been saying? Have you been leaning in at all? Do you have ears to hear and hearts that are open to my corrective work in your life?”**

And this is such a good question for us to close our series with because the question is never – “Is Jesus speaking?” He has been speaking to us during this series through His Word and through His Spirit. The question is always – are we listening? Are we open to what God wants to do in our life to discipline us, shape us, mold us, change us more and more into the image of His Son?

The City of Laodicea

So that's where we're headed today. But before we get into the letter to Laodicea, let's first chat about the city of Laodicea. Because this letter is full of metaphor and imagery that you have to understand in order to get the full weight of what Jesus is saying. So stick with me here, okay?



As you can see on the **map**, Laodicea is sort of separated from the rest of the cities down there in the south. It is located in what was known as the Lycus Valley, right next to two other cities - Hierapolis and Colossae. If you were to go visit today, you would find ruins that look something **like this**.

Now, Laodicea in the first century was known for quite a bit of things, let me just talk about four:



Good:

- **Clothing** – Laodicea was the leading manufacturer and trader of black wool in the ancient world. People would travel from all over to come buy clothes made out of this specific material and color.
- **Medical School** – “Phrygian Powder”. It was a paste-like substance made from a specific mineral found near the city that was used to treat various eye conditions.
- **Wealth** – They were a banking epicenter. Not unlike the city where we live today. Home to some of the world’s leading banks at that time, full of riches and prosperity. They were so wealthy in fact, that although they experienced a massive earthquake in 60 AD, they didn’t need the help of the Romans to rebuild as a city like the other churches we saw in Revelation. They had more than enough money to handle their own issues.
- **Water Supply** – Laodicea had no water supply of its own. They were reliant on two different sources from their two neighboring cities. Hierapolis had famous hot springs that were full of healing properties, and Colossae had plenty of clean and cold mountain water good for drinking and refreshment. The problem was that by the time it reached Laodicea, it all mixed together and went through their unsanitized pipes, leading to lukewarm water that was known to make those who drank it sick to their stomachs to the point of vomiting.

Stylish clothes. Eye doctors. Big banks. Bad water. This is Laodicea. And all of that plays a role in what Jesus says to the church in this city.

Lukewarm

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.

Jesus here starts how he starts most of the other letters – “**I know your works.**” You cannot hide from or fool Jesus. He is the faithful and true witness who knows all things and does not lie. He knows the truth about Laodicea and he tells them that truth.

You’re not hot, you’re not cold, you’re lukewarm and it’s making me sick.

Now, let’s get clear on what Jesus is actually saying here. Because here’s how folks tend to read this passage...Jesus says it’s better to be cold than lukewarm! He would rather you not be a Christian than be a lukewarm Christian! So let’s get on fire for Jesus!

But I don’t think that’s what Jesus is saying at all. Think about the imagery of Laodicea’s water supply. **Both the hot water and the cold water from the neighboring cities are good and beneficial to people.**

- The hot water from Hierapolis brought healing to various ailments and illnesses and pain.
- The cold water from Colossae brought refreshment and nourishment to those who were thirsty.
- But by the time the water reaches Laodicea, it’s lukewarm, polluted, and causing people to vomit.

Jesus says this is the spiritual state of the church in Laodicea.

It would be good for them to be like hot water and provide healing for the spiritually sick. It would be good for them to be like cold water bringing refreshment for the spiritually thirsty and weary. **But they are not spiritually beneficial to anyone.** All they have to offer is lukewarm water that makes people vomit.

It's not a statement about the half-hearted faith of the Laodiceans, although that is a rebuke we've seen Jesus give to other churches like Sardis, it is more a statement about their inability to offer spiritual help or life or vitality to one another or to the world.

Colin Hemer – “The church was judged for its ineffectiveness rather than its halfheartedness, for the barrenness of its works rather than its spiritual temperature.”

In other words, it was not so much they were apathetic in their moods, as they were apathetic in their deeds. They were lazy. They were not beneficial to the spiritually needy in their city. They're just sort of there as one big clump of “meh”. And it's sickening to Jesus.

The Self-Reliant Church

Now here's where the passage gets really good. Because Jesus doesn't stop there. He's going to keep pulling the curtain back exposing more of this church's heart. Because being lukewarm is a symptom of a deeper issue. There's something leading to their lukewarm-ness. Let's see what that is...

17 For (“because”, here's why you're lukewarm, here's why you're spiritually gross, here's why you're making me sick Jesus says) **you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing...**

The core problem with Laodicea is not some false teaching making its way into the church. It's not some big sex scandal from the teachings of Jezebel. It's not persecution from the Romans.

The core problem with Laodicea is their pride. Their arrogance. Their self-reliance.

Laodicea – the self-reliant church

We are just fine by ourselves. We need nothing and no one. What's the subtext underneath that phrase? We need nothing and no one...including God.

Jesus says to the church in Laodicea – do you want to know why you have no spiritual life? Do you want to know why you're not spiritually beneficial to anyone around? Do you want to know why you don't have a vibrant and living and life-giving relationship with me?

Because you think you're doing just fine without me. You don't think you need me anymore.

And this is not new or unique to the church at Laodicea. This has been the bent of the human heart from the very beginning of history. In Genesis 1, when God creates the first man and woman in his image, part of what he calls them to do as his image bearers is to *have dominion*. That is to join Him in ruling and reigning over the world. There is something put into the design of mankind that is meant to rule and reign – but always with God and under God, not outside of God.

And yet what happens in Genesis 3? Satan shows up and how does he tempt Eve with the fruit? If you eat it, what? You will be like God...What is God like? He's self-sufficient. Self-existent. He needs nothing and no one. He has everything He needs in Himself.

This is, after all, the reminder we got about Jesus at the start of the letter – He is the beginning of God's creation. That is not a statement of order, that He came first. Because Jesus was not created, He has always existed. Jesus being the beginning of God's creation is not a statement of order but a statement of prominence. Jesus is before creation – meaning he is over it, through it, in it. In Him all things hold together and nothing was made that has been made. (John 1).

Everything else but God exists because of God, which means it is all, including us, dependent on God. Everything is needy except for Him. He is self-existent.

And the devil shows up, liar that he is, and says to Eve – don't you want to be like God? Don't want you to be free from needing anyone or anything, including God Himself anymore? Don't you want independence and autonomy?

Does He not still tempt us in the same way – Don't you want to be like God? Self-sufficient. Self reliant. This has been the pull of the human heart from the very beginning, and it is the temptation on all of us even today. Whether consciously or subconsciously, whether explicitly or implicitly, so much of our lives are set up to try and be okay on our own without God.

The idol of self-reliance:

- **Finances.** We can look to money to live life free from needing God. This is the Laodiceans. Banking capital of the ancient world. Global leader in trade for a hot commodity like black wool. Medical advancements sought after by people from far away places. They have everything they could ever want. Laodicea has it made. They're good.
- **Relationships.** Our significant others, our spouses/boyfriend/girlfriend/best friend – can become functional gods to us. Can be ways we try to live life independently from God by looking to others for what only He can truly offer and give us.
- **Spiritual Life.** There is a way we can “do” Christianity that never actually makes us depend on God. **Personal –** I'm really good at being a Christian. I don't mean that pridefully, I've just been doing it for a long time. Following Jesus for 25 years, vocational ministry for a decade. I've got degrees. I'm elite at running a Christian life separate from the power of the Holy Spirit. So if I find myself struggling with an anger issue, I can just walk through some steps and some Bible passages and convince myself I'm good to go. If I need to have some stuff to confess to the guys in my Community Group, I know exactly how much to share to look vulnerable but never actually deal with what's going on in my heart.

These are just a few ways, maybe you can think of more for yourself, that we try to organize and arrange and create lives where we can say with the Laodiceans – I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing...

The Reality about Laodicea

The problem with self-reliance is that (1) It kills our life with God.

Just like the Laodiceans it makes us lukewarm and spiritually sickening to the Lord. Because you cannot be self-reliant and Jesus-reliant at the same time. I can't give my energy to trying to fix all my problems on my own, and at the same time think that's going to lead to intimacy with God.

- Why should I expect my love for God to grow, when all of my comfort and security is found in my bank account?
- Why should I expect my intimacy with God to strengthen, when I'm anxious I don't pray, I just call Lindsay?

- Why do I think I would grow in sensitivity to the Holy Spirit when I'm more reliant on a 4 step process or a great counseling session, than I am on the work of the Holy Spirit?

Self-reliance kills life with God. It's a constant refrain in Jesus' ministry. Those who know their need – physical need, spiritual need, relational need, whatever the case may be – those who are deeply aware of their brokenness are the ones open to the work of Christ. And those who think they're doing awesome – the rich, the Pharisees – they are the ones who miss the miracles of the Messiah.

So the problem with self-reliance is (1) it kills our life with God, but (2) it's just simply not true.

The Laodiceans think they're doing just great. But the faithful and true King Jesus who sees and knows all things is going to tell them reality...

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.

You think you're doing great. You have puffed yourself up with pride. And yet, Jesus says that's not true at all. You've built this self-reliant life. But here's the reality – you are much more broken than you realize.

Do you feel the way how every time you try and be self-reliant it somehow always crumbles?

Jesus' Offer to the Church

But here's the good news...Jesus doesn't stop there. He stops there, this passage is kind of awful. "Hey, you guys think you're awesome, you actually stink. So uh, see you later."

But look at the very next verse:

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.

Look at this thread:

- You think you're **rich**, you're actually **poor**, but I have **true** and **lasting gold**. Riches beyond what you can imagine, I am offering to you. The riches of life forever with God. Buy this from me. What does that mean? Give me your faith, your trust, your surrender and in return I will give you riches beyond what you can comprehend – an inheritance in the kingdom of God.
- You think you've got awesome **clothes**, but in reality you're **naked**. Nakedness in the scriptures was a symbol of judgment and humiliation – of shame. And yet Jesus offers, to this city known for black wool, **white gowns**. We said last week this is a symbol of purity, of holiness. Jesus says though right now you're marked by spiritual shame, I offer you holiness that comes from me. I offer you righteousness. My righteousness purchased for you on the cross, given to you freely by grace through faith.
- You think you've got the **special eye powder**, in reality you're **blind** to your own **spiritual depravity** and **decay...but** I offer you **true spiritual salve** so that you may see. I offer you eyes that are not blinded by the lies of the world, eyes that are not blind to your own brokenness, eyes that are not deceived into looking around you for wholeness and flourishing, but eyes that can see the glory of God such that you worship Him.

Church, do you see how the gospel is all over this letter?

I mean is this not the story of every single one of us that trusts in Jesus?

We think we're awesome. Going about life on our own. Trying to hold it all together. Trying to earn some sort of identity or standing or place in this world. Trying to be our own gods and often thinking we're doing great.

And then out of nowhere, due to no merit or righteousness of our own, before we even wanted Him, while we were His enemies – Jesus shows up in our lives. He comes to us, before we come to Him.

And in His kindness He shows up – we're not in fact awesome. He reveals to us the brokenness of our souls. He gives us eyes to see our own sin and need for a Savior.

And then in His mercy does not leave us there, but offers us freely through his blood, his death, his resurrection – everything we were searching for in the first place. Welcome, Identity, Forgiveness, Life. A place forever with God in His Kingdom.

The story of the Laodiceans is the story of all who trust in Jesus Christ – “We're awesome. We have life on our own!” Jesus shows up – “no you don't! – but look at what I have to offer you freely! Life that is truly life.”

Jesus Disciplines Those He Loves

That is how Christ works to save us. But this is also how we works to sanctify us (grow us into Christ-likeness).

19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

The entrance into the Christian life is found in giving up our self-reliance, acknowledging our weakness and brokenness, and throwing ourselves on the mercy and grace of God.

But progress in the Christian life is found in the same thing – in giving up our self-reliance, acknowledging our weakness and brokenness, and throwing ourselves on the mercy and grace of God.

Because what happens is we start following him for a bit, the idol of self-reliance and self-sufficiency starts creeping back in, we start once again thinking we're awesome on our own, good on our own, handling things on our own. And in His love for us, He uses His word and His people to show us we're not, to discipline us in His love for us, and draw us back in repentance to Himself.

That's how we enter the Christian life, that's how we make progress in the Christian life. That's how we're saved once and sanctified over and over again.

IF – we are willing to listen to the corrective discipline of Jesus.

That's been the question underneath all of the other questions we've asked in this series – **Are you listening to the corrective and loving discipline of Jesus?**

We've wrestled with hard questions of conviction during this series...and the question underneath those questions is very simply – are you listening when God is disciplining?

God Comes Where He's Wanted

You've got to wrestle with this question. Because God is going to discipline you. He loves you and because He loves you He will not let you stay stuck. Good fathers vs. bad fathers.

But here's what you need to understand...while He will be faithful to do His work...the question then becomes – how will you respond? Are you open to that corrective and loving discipline? Are you open to God getting all of your heart, not just pieces? Are you willing to lay down your self-sufficiency, your control, your comfort, your need for approval, that idol you can't imagine living without?

Look at what Jesus says in v20...

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.

We've talked a lot about how rich the city of Laodicea was at that time. But one of the difficulties that came with that wealth was the city's relationship to Rome. Whereas the other cities we've looked at were deeply reliant on Rome and needed Rome, Laodicea did not, and so that threatened Rome.

And so one of the ways Rome would try to exercise power over this city is through a law that Roman soldiers in the city, any time they wanted, could barge into your house, and you were required to house them, feed them, clothe them, OR you would be killed for treason.

And here comes Jesus. In the letter – "I discipline those I love. I will not let you stay stuck. I'm going to work in your heart to lead you to repentance. But I'm not like the Roman soldiers. I will not force my way in. I stand at the door and I knock."

Invitation after invitation to repent.

- *Knock knock* – Don't abandon your love for me.
- *Knock knock* – Don't be ashamed of my name.
- *Knock knock* – Don't compromise with your sin.
- *Knock knock* – Don't tolerate false teaching.
- *Knock knock* – Don't stay spiritually dead.
- *Knock knock* – Don't neglect my kingdom mission.

Will you let me in to come and be with you and do the work I want to do in your life?

Practical - Prayer of Examen

Ignatius of Loyola – 15th Century founder of the Jesuits

- 1. Become aware of God's presence.**
- 2. Review your day with gratitude.**
- 3. Review your day with repentance.**
- 4. Ask for forgiveness and healing.**
- 5. Ask for renewed strength for tomorrow.**

Time of Response.

Pray.

