

We have come to the last of Jesus' messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. This one is to the church in Laodicea. This is a tough one to face. Jesus has nothing positive to say about this church. He uses some of the strongest language in the NT to describe his displeasure with this church. There is hope in this section of Scripture. Jesus does provide a way forward to this church. But the way forward is definitely not business as usual. If this church does not make significant changes, it will not be well with them.

Thankfully, what Jesus says here in his description of the church at Laodicea does not describe every church. Just as, in the churches addressed in the seven letters, each church today is in better or worse shape according to Jesus' evaluation. Some churches are healthier than others. And presumably those of us who are members here are here because we think that this church is a faithful church while at the same time recognizing that we are far from perfect.

But we must take all the warnings of Scripture seriously. Scripture, including this passage, makes it clear that it is possible to think that all is well when all is not well. Scripture also makes it clear that thinking all is well when all is not well is not uncommon. That is why we must take all of the warnings of Scripture seriously and be willing to be searched by the Scriptures so that we can be made aware of blind spots and areas where we may be not facing the reality about our spiritual condition. The attitude that we must have is expressed in Psalm 139:23-24 where David prays, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." That should be our attitude as we approach this passage which hard to face.

One of the characteristics of the religion of the Bible is its concern with truth. That has many different facets, but one of them is facing the truth about ourselves. And it is significant that Jesus in this passage refers to himself in terms of truth. "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation." We saw in our study of Colossians last week that Jesus is the one through whom the Father created the world. Jesus, referring to himself as the beginning of God's creation here, is claiming to be the beginning of God's creation in the sense of being the creator. He is the beginning of God's creation in the sense of being the one through whom the creation came into being. That means that he is God. This is who is addressing us in this passage.

And he refers to himself as the "Amen." When Jesus was on earth he often prefaced his teaching by saying, "Truly, Truly I say to you." The word "truly" in those expressions is literally "amen." So, when Jesus refers to himself as "the Amen" he is saying us that he is the true one. The word "Amen" has to do with certainty. When we say "amen" in response to something that someone says, it means that we agree that it is true. When we say "amen" at the end of our prayers, the meaning is "may it certainly be." When Jesus refers to himself as "the Amen" he is saying that he is the ultimate truth and certainty. He is echoing Isaiah 65:16 where God refers to himself as "the God of truth." Jesus is so associated with truth that he can refer to himself as "the way, the truth and the life" in John 14:6. He is the embodiment of the truth. The depth of what that

means if beyond our ability to comprehend, but whatever it means in its fullness, it is clear that Jesus speaks the truth, he is utterly reliable, and he is concerned about what is true and what is real - about the way things really are.

Jesus also refers to himself as “the faithful and true witness.” That is obviously a related thought, but it is a reminder of Jesus’ witness to the truth during his earthly life and what it cost him. In the book of Revelation, one of the great concerns is that the followers of Jesus be faithful and truth witnesses in a context where witnessing to the truth of Jesus can lead to persecution. Jesus is the ultimate faithful and true witness who was faithful even unto death.

These words of self-description by Jesus provide the context in which to understand what he says to the church in Laodicea. Jesus is underlining the absolute truthfulness of what he is about to say as well as his own exalted status as “the beginning of God’s creation.”

What he says to the Laodicean church is rather shocking. Verses 15-16, “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.” Clearly Jesus has very strong feelings about lukewarmness. And lukewarmness is exactly what we think it is. It is a lack of passion or zeal in serving Jesus. Another word that conveys the same idea is “half-heartedness.” The first and great commandment is that we are to love God with all our hearts and Jesus, in this text, is telling us how he feels when our love is half-hearted.

Now one problem in understanding these verses is that Jesus says, “Would that you were either cold or hot!” Jesus prefers even coldness over lukewarmness. That is a problematic idea. The Bible teaches that Jesus is filled with wrath against those who have no love for him at all. So, what then does Jesus mean when he says that he prefers coldness to lukewarmness? There are a couple of things to say about this. One is that we are not to press the imagery too far. The point that Jesus is making is that he despises lukewarmness. That is the focus and we should not press Jesus’ words about wishing they were either cold or hot to mean that coldness is literally preferable to lukewarmness.

But there is another insight into the coldness idea that comes from the background to the situation at Laodicea. The ancient city of Laodicea had a problem with its water supply. The local water was not drinkable. Furthermore, the two neighboring cities had wonderful water supplies albeit in different ways. The city of Hierapolis had medicinal hot springs and the city of Colossae had wonderful fresh cold water. The city of Laodicea had built an aqueduct from Hierapolis, but by the time the water traveled the five miles from the hot springs it would be no longer hot – it would be lukewarm. Colossae was further away so there was no aqueduct, but if drinking water came from there it would no longer be fresh and cold when it got to Laodicea. So Laodicea was between a city that had wonderful hot water and a city that had wonderful cold water, but it had to live with lukewarm water and the local water was undrinkable.

That water problem is behind the imagery that Jesus uses to denounce the Laodicean church for its lukewarmness. In that context, hot water was good and cold water was good, but lukewarm water was yuk. So the idea of spiritual lukewarmness still applies, but the situation that gave rise to Jesus use of the hot/cold imagery helps explain why Jesus would say that he would prefer the Laodiceans to be either hot or cold.

Now one of the reasons that this passage is so hard hitting for us is what Jesus says next. Verse 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.” Laodicea was a very rich city. It was situated on a trade route and as a result the people who lived there, as a whole, were rich. This was a well-to-do community. It was an affluent community. And affluence and lukewarmness often go together. Remember the words of Jesus when he said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

The biblical teaching about wealth is that it is not wrong, but that it is dangerous. There is nothing wrong with having more money than we actually need to survive. But being well off is a temptation to be lukewarm towards God. It is a temptation, when we have money, to place our trust in our money for security. And there is a temptation, when we have money, to put too much emphasis on all the fun things that we can do with our money. If we have it easy and enjoyable, as far as this earthly life is concerned, the temptation is to have less interest in the kingdom of God – hence lukewarmness concerning God and his kingdom.

This was the problem in Laodicea. They were prosperous and they were lukewarm – two things that often go together. We live in a very prosperous society. Even the least prosperous among us have more in terms of material comforts than most of the other people in history and most of the other people in the world today. And so the danger of lukewarmness is particularly real for us – to be passionate about this earthly life and half-hearted about our relationship with God and about living our life in such a way as to be pleasing to him. Being passionate about God and pleasing him involves keeping the enjoyment of the pleasures of life integrated with our love for God by thanksgiving and it also involves being passionate about things like worship and prayer and service and witness. We know that we are lukewarm towards Jesus if we do not think much about him and if there is not a lot of effort in our lives consciously to please him. We can discern lukewarmness if we examine our thoughts and our loves to see where we are passionate and where we do as little as we think we can get away with.

Clearly Jesus has strong feelings about lukewarmness. He says, “I will spit you out of my mouth.” That is a striking and disturbing image. It is a picture of rejection in disgust. Those who do not repent of their lukewarmness will be rejected by Jesus in a way that is analogous to spitting out something that tastes disgusting. Clearly Jesus feels very strongly about this. And that means that we had better take seriously what he is saying here about his feelings about lukewarmness!

Now one of the things that is so disturbing about these verses is that we are all lukewarm to some extent. We are all less passionate about Jesus than we should be. We are all more earthly-minded than we should be. But

that does not mean that we are all going to be spit out by Jesus. He tells us in the next few verses what we need to be doing to repent of lukewarmness. 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.”

Jesus makes provision for the lukewarm so that they may not be rejected by him. First he says to buy from him gold refined by fire, so that they might be truly rich. Jesus is saying that there is a kind of riches that is so precious that, compared to it, earthly riches are actually poverty. The Laodiceans were rich in earthly riches, but, in reality, they were poor because they were lukewarm towards Jesus. Jesus says to buy from him true riches – gold refined by fire.

Gold refined by fire is pure gold. Jesus is referring to salvation – especially the life that flows from salvation. In this context the gold purified by fire is the life purified from sin. Couple of times in the gospels Jesus relates the Christian life to laying up treasure in heaven. So, to buy from Jesus gold refined by fire here probably refers to repenting of lukewarmness and living passionately for Jesus. The ability to live that kind of life comes from Jesus and the whole of the Scriptural teaching about salvation is that we are truly rich when we live the kind of God-centered and God-honoring life that salvation makes possible. It may be that Jesus is referring to being more zealous about the kind of witnessing for Jesus that leads to suffering. Peter in 1 Peter 1 says that faith that is tested by persecution and found to be genuine is “more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire.”

Jesus’ point in this that living lives focused on earthly pleasures is in fact poverty and living life passionately for Jesus is true riches even if it involves suffering. As we have seen many times before from many different passages of Scripture, fullness of life is life lived for God and to God. And Jesus is making that point here.

He also counsels the Laodicean to buy from him, “white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the same of your nakedness may not be seen.” That is a reference to the righteousness that Jesus has earned for us and which is received by faith. The language of buying is not meant to convey the idea that we must earn Jesus’ righteousness. Jesus is just making the point that the white garments come from him. Isaiah 55 also uses the idea of buying, but it makes it clear that when it comes to the salvation we buy without money and without price.

So we have the gospel here for people who are lukewarm. We all struggle with lukewarmness in varying degrees, but Jesus is teaching us that the way to be on good terms with him in spite of lukewarmness is to be coming to him for the ability to fight against lukewarmness and for the forgiveness that is represented by the white garments.

Jesus also tells the Laodiceans to buy from him, “salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.” One of the reasons for speaking about eye-salve here is that there was a medical facility in Laodicea that was known for

its eye-salve. So, Jesus uses the imagery of eye-salve to make the point that those who are lukewarm about Jesus are blind. Those who are more passionate about money and material things and earthly pleasures than Jesus are that way because they are not seeing straight. That is something for us to think about as we consider our own lukewarmness to Jesus. To the degree that we are passionate about other things more than Jesus and living for him, we are not seeing straight. We need to buy eye-salve from Jesus so that our spiritual vision will be corrected, and we will see what is truly precious and what is infinitely less precious by comparison.

Now earlier Jesus had said that he would spit out of his mouth those who were lukewarm. That is strong and striking language. But it does not mean that Jesus does not love those who are lukewarm. In verse 19 Jesus says, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent." This example of strong feelings of disgust and the language of love right next to each other is interesting. It reminds us that a love relationship elicits strong feelings.

Think of how God, in the OT, spoke of his love relationship with his people. That relationship is compared with a marriage. When one of the persons in a marriage commits adultery – love and wrath are mixed together. I think that gives us insight into Jesus' strong language about threatening to spit the lukewarm out of his mouth and a few verses later speaking of his love. The relationship between Jesus and his people is a tender one. That means that when we are not faithful to the relationship by being lukewarm it evokes strong feelings on Jesus' part. But he is still loving his people and he expresses that love by reproof and discipline to bring about repentance.

So, the strong language that Jesus uses is an expression of his love and what love is after for the lukewarm is repentance. Once again, repentance is the key. There is a huge and fundamental difference between lukewarmness which is acknowledged and confessed and fought against and lukewarmness about which one is unconcerned. No one is free from lukewarmness, but if we are confessing it and taking it to Jesus and seeking his grace to fight against it, it is one thing. But if we are lukewarm and unconcerned that is something altogether different. If that is the case, we had better think seriously about the possibility of being spit out by Jesus. And to do what Jesus is telling us to do is repenting of lukewarmness.

The tender love of Jesus continues to be expressed in verse 20, "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me." This verse is a wonderful expression of Jesus' tender love. The context in which it is found is all-important to get a sense of its pathos. The context is a church which is demonstrating a neglect of Jesus by their lukewarmness. Jesus love for them is strong and passionate while they are showing more interest in the things of earth instead of him. This verse about Jesus standing at the door and knocking is a remarkable expression of the persistence of Jesus' love in the face of the attraction of his people for other lovers. Jesus is expressing his desire for fellowship with his people. He wants his people to stop being lukewarm about him and give him the love of their hearts. If wants them to open the door of their hearts and let him in. He wants to share a meal with

them. He wants them to sit across from him and give him their full attention. This passage expresses Jesus' longing for fellowship with his people.

The imagery is an amazing expression of condescension. The picture of Jesus standing at the door and knocking in this context where his people are lukewarm is absolutely astonishing. In the first verse of this section Jesus refers to himself as the beginning of God's creation and now he is describing himself as knocking at the door of the hearts of his lukewarm people who are half-hearted in their love for him. What a powerful image of condescension! But that is what God's amazing grace is! Jesus is pleading with his people to give him the love of their hearts. Standing at the door and knocking ... that is an image of asking – it is an image of asking permission to enter in. When we think of who it is who is knocking and who it is who is being asked to open the door – this is astounding! Spitting us out of his mouth is more understandable. This kind of humbly asking for permission to enter in is astonishing. And such is the grace of God! Such is the amazing grace of Jesus.

Jesus' tender patience with us is an amazing thing. The OT often refers to God's longsuffering with his wayward people and his steadfast love in the face of their spiritual adultery. Psalm 36:5 says, "Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds." Jesus' standing at the door and knocking is a wonderful expression of steadfast love. But there is an even greater expression of that steadfast love and that was Jesus' willingness to give his life on the cross for our sins. Philippians 2:8 says that Jesus "humbled himself by becoming obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross." There is something absolutely staggering about God humbling himself to bring spiritual adulterers back to himself.

And seeing something of that will help us repent of our lukewarmness. It helps us to see how evil lukewarmness is and how amazing Jesus' love is! As the hymn puts it "Love so amazing, so divine/Demands my soul, my life, my all." May the Lord indeed anoint the eyes of our hearts with his powerful eye-salve of word and Spirit to see how superior Jesus is to the things that we consider more important than him when we are lukewarm toward him.

Finally we have another promise for those who conquer. Verse 21, "The one who conquers, I will grant him to set with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne." Conquering in this context is never giving up on the fight against lukewarmness. It is continuing to fight the fight of faith and not giving in to worldliness and complacency. It means continuing to fight the faith against sin through the enabling grace of Jesus.

The promise is that those who conquer will sit with Jesus on his throne. We were created in the image of God to have dominion over the earth. And while as fallen creatures there is still a sense in which we have dominion over the earth, there is also a sense in which we are slaves of Satan. Jesus came to set us free from Satan and from sin. And one of the results of his salvation is that we will know in its fullness what it means to have dominion. It involves winning the fight over sin and Satan through salvation in Jesus. But it will also involve the

fulfillment of our calling to have dominion over the earth. Jesus as the God-man is the perfect man. Part of that perfection is fulfilling humanities calling to reign on earth. And we will share in that reign if we conquer by his grace.

But the way of conquering is the way of humiliation and suffering following the example of Christ. Jesus conquered through love. He conquered through humbling himself to serve those who had rejected God's rule. He conquered through loving the unlovely and giving his life so that they might live. He conquered through looking not to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. To conquer as Christ conquered is to follow his example of embracing self-denial and suffering for the glory of God and for the blessing of people.

And that is the opposite of lukewarmness. Lukewarmness is about being lukewarm towards loving and following Jesus which means being passionate about ourselves and our pleasures. Lukewarmness is about weakness of passion for loving and pleasing God and zeal for serving ourselves. We are never lukewarm about everything. We will always be passionate about something. What this passage is about is the importance of being passionate about the right things and the person, Jesus, whom to be passionate about is true riches.