

The Seven Letters (8): The Church in Laodicea

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[0:00] Turn with me, if you will, in your Bibles to Revelation chapter 3 and from verse 14 to verse 20. This is page 1030 in your pew Bible. Revelation chapter 3 from verse 14 to verse 22.

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.

In other words, the words of the one who can be trusted. 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. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing. Not realizing that you're wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich. White garments, so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen.

[1:13] And salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love I deplore and discipline. So be zealous and repent. 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. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne. As I also conquered and sat down with my father on his throne.

He who is an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence.

May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Some of us here may remember the TV game show, Call My Bluff.

Call My Bluff featured questions identifying the correct definition of obscure English words. One such word might have been Laodicean.

[2:26] A word which is very rarely used in the English language, but which according to the Collins English Dictionary, and Colin always uses the Collins English Dictionary, it means lukewarm or indifferent.

Synonyms of Laodicean include half-hearted, apathetic, uninterested, and unenthusiastic. Now I don't know if the word Laodicean was ever used in Call My Bluff.

But I guess we get the general meaning. There are certain things about which it's okay to be Laodicean. For example, whether Forster Athletic beat Clyde in next season's Football League.

But there are other things about which it's absolutely criminal to be Laodicean. One of which is our attitude to the Lord Jesus Christ. As Anne said, we can either hate Him or we can love Him.

But to be indifferent about Him is simply unacceptable. It's criminal, especially when those who are Laodicean about Jesus claim to be His followers.

[3:38] That's not just criminal. That's disgusting. The English word Laodicean is derived, of course, from the name of the final church to which Jesus wrote a letter in Revelation.

The church in Laodicea. Now that was a city which is situated in modern-day western Turkey. It was one among three cities which were closely located together.

Colossae, to which the apostle Paul wrote the letter of Colossians. Hierapolis, to which the letter of Philemon was written.

And Laodicea. They were all quite close together. And of the three, Jesus chose to write to Laodicea because it was lukewarm. It was apathetic, indifferent, disinterested concerning its relationship to Jesus and the zeal with which they followed Him.

So, this was a church which didn't hate Jesus, but neither did it love Jesus. It was half-hearted.

Despite all of this, it was a church which, for His part anyway, Jesus loved dearly.

[4:46] They may not have wanted Him, but He desperately wanted them. He wouldn't settle for half their hearts. He wanted the whole.

Are there any here today who, following Nan's children's talk, are giving Jesus only half their hearts? Who, for all they may call themselves Christians, are apathetic about Him. Grown cold in our love for Him. He zealously loves us. But we don't want Him over-interfering in our lives. There are, therefore, two features of Jesus' letter to the church in Laodicea upon which we want to focus this morning.

Two aspects which are of equal importance. First, Laodicea was a church which is lukewarm. But secondly, Laodicea is a church which is loved. It's lukewarm and it's loved.

Both are equally true. And we must take both very seriously if we want to break out of this destructive cycle of apathy and disinterest and return to the zeal and passion of love for Christ.

[5:58] First of all, then, a church that's lukewarm. Church that's lukewarm. In many ways, Laodicea was the most important city in the region, more important than Colossae or Hierapolis.

It was a very important trade route from east to west. And that made Laodicea a very rich and wealthy city, a place where the streets were paved with gold, we might say.

It was also an industrial centre, producing high-quality, expensive black wool used all across the Roman Empire. And furthermore, Laodicea had an important medical school, which specialised in medicines and procedures involving the eyes.

But for all their temporal advantages of being rich and of being busy and of being advanced, the church of Laodicea was the most sickening of all the churches to which Jesus wrote letters.

He says to it, You are neither cold nor hot. You are lukewarm. Now, the city of Laodicea did not have a natural spring, so it was supplied with water through a system of aqueducts.

[7:11] The nearby city of Colossae was known as having cold water sources. The other nearby city of Hierapolis was known as having hot springs.

The water which travelled in the system of aqueducts which supplied Laodicea was neither hot like Harapolis nor cold like Colossae. It was lukewarm.

It was somewhere in the middle like Goldilocks. The water in Laodicea was also known as having hot water. The water in Laodicea was also known to be rich in minerals, so it had a very distinctive flavour, which is not to everyone's taste.

If you're looking for a glass of cold, clear water on a hot day, you won't find it in Laodicea. Like the city, like the church, Christians there were lukewarm in their faith.

Just like the water in Laodicea was tepid, so the Christians in the church were tepid in their faith in Christ. They were neither hot nor cold, and just like the water in Laodicea, they were kind of distasteful and sickening.

[8:17] So for that reason, Jesus says he's going to spit them or vomit them out of his mouth. If there is no change on the hearts of these Christians in Laodicea, Jesus will exact upon them a dramatic judgment.

To civilised company, the thought of spitting out a mouthful of water is shocking. But tepid, distasteful, polluted water is, for Jesus, just that.

Fit only to be spat out, vomited out, rejected. And the problem was entirely their lukewarmness. They were neither cold nor were they hot.

The word for hot is, in Greek, the word from which we get our word zest. The Laodiceans were neither cold in their attitude to Christ or zesty in their attitude to Christ.

They were somewhere in the middle. They carried the appearance of being Christians, but on the inside they were tepid, lukewarm. Christians in the church in Laodicea, compared to Christians in the other churches, were very wealthy.

[9:27] They were self-satisfied because their pockets were filled with gold. And that was their problem. They didn't think they needed anything from God because they had everything this world could offer them now.

They were enjoying their best life now, so what need had they of God? For what did they need to pray if they already had everything they could ever want? That's what rendered them apathetic in their faith.

They were super wealthy, super sufficient, reliant upon no one and nobody. They wouldn't have said it publicly. But the Jesus who knows them intimately puts words into their mouths.

He says, you say, I am rich. I have prospered. I need nothing. They're wealthy and they know it. And they think they themselves are the reasons for their prosperity and that ultimately they have no need of anything at all.

They are self-made men and women, luxuriating in their prosperity and wealth, dependent upon no one but themselves. They did not suffer from the same persecution other churches did, nor were they poisoned by false teaching.

[10 : 38] If they had, perhaps they would have been forced toward being either hot or cold. Because you can't stay neutral when the gospel is at stake.

But Laodicea had it the easiest of all the churches in Revelation. And perhaps, again, that's one reason it was so apathetic and lukewarm in its faith in Jesus. You know, the more I thought about it, the more I think the church in Laodicea is a picture of the Western church today.

A church to which a lullaby has been sung which sends it to sleep. A church which has been disempowered by its drive toward consumerism.

The implicit message that success equals wealth and our aim in life is to be successful. Diluted by compromise with the world in trying not to stand out but to fit in.

We aren't persecuted so we don't have to stand up for the gospel in any way, shape or form.

Compare the church in the West with the church in the majority world.

[11 : 48] You don't find apathetic Christians in Iran. Where the church is under pressure. It's a dangerous luxury to be an apathetic Christian in Nigeria.

So we hear inspiring stories of Christian witness. We hear from believers in the Middle East. For to be known as a Christian is a death sentence. There's no apathy in the church there.

You find apathy only in the Western church because we are so very wealthy in the things of this world. If all our heaven is now, why look forward to a future heaven?

And Jesus says to them, I wish you were either hot or cold. Hot or cold. It's a hard teaching. One of my go-to commentators writes these words.

An honest atheist is more acceptable to God than a self-satisfied religious man. An honest atheist is more acceptable to God than a self-satisfied religious man.

[12 : 57] Those who are self-satisfied in the performance of the religion, satisfied with themselves, satisfied with the practice of religion, are in danger of being spat out of the mouth of Jesus and completely rejected.

A number of years ago, I visited a large church in the Midwest of America. And the minister that day was one of the best preachers in the world.

He was speaking about idolatry. The sin of putting other things before God. And he identified many things which can prove to be idols to us as Christians.

But in this uber-wealthy church, where everyone drove in in their fancy cars, were garbed in designer gear, Nike and Gucci, everyone returned home to their huge detached houses, because the only idol the preacher did not identify was money.

Now perhaps I'm being unfair to him, but I couldn't help thinking that he was afraid of offending his hearers. Those who, like me, epitomize today's Western church.

[14 : 16] Getting back to Laodicea, the problem wasn't what they knew, but what they didn't know. So, Jesus says to them, don't you know that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked?

Don't you know these things? In the eyes of Jesus is what ultimately matters. They were the exact opposite of everything they prided themselves on. They weren't wealthy.

They were wretched. They aren't posh. They are pitiable. They aren't prosperous. They are poor.

They're not clear-sighted. They're blind. They're not fully clothed. They're naked.

The Christians in Laodicea are everything they boast themselves on not being. On account of their apathy toward Jesus, their lack of zeal, their lack of love for Jesus, they are to him what poor beggars are to us.

It must have been a terrible shock to the church there to have heard such criticism. That rather than being the prosperous, well-to-do church they thought they were, in the eyes of Jesus, they are destitute vagrants who haven't washed or changed their clothes for months.

[15 : 25] It's their neutrality to him which condemns them. We must be so careful to pray for Jesus' perspective on us as a church. Remember in Robert Byrne's poem, He calls us to famously appeal to see ourselves the way others see us.

How does Jesus see us today? As we see ourselves? Or something different? Are we, in reality, not as prosperous as we think we are?

Because we are simply too apathetic about our faith in Jesus and our attitude toward him isn't zesty. And then he gives them advice.

He says, I counseled you to buy from me gold refined by fire so you may be rich, white garments 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.

True to the context of Laodicea, rather than pursue worldly wealth, Jesus counsels them to pursue spiritual wealth which is found alone in a living relationship with him.

[16:41] Jesus counsels them to buy from him not black wool, but white wool, so that they may be fully clothed in his eyes, the whiteness of purity and holiness and righteousness, and to buy from him salve to anoint their eyes, spiritual eye medicine, so that they may see themselves in the way Jesus does, and they may see Jesus in the beauty and awesomeness of his love.

Rather than judge themselves by competing themselves against other churches, or by being molded by the society in which they were found, the Laodicean Christians needed to start focusing on their relationship to Jesus.

What a man is before Jesus, that is what he is. No more, no less. What a man is before Jesus, that is what he is.

There is the measure of our status before God, not how we appear to be before others, not our level of worldly wealth, reputation, or status, but what we are in the eyes of God.

Our attitude to Jesus, cold, lukewarm, or zesty. That's what we are before God. In Philippians chapter 3, the apostle Paul describes that his greatest ambition in life was to know Christ.

[18:15] Again, in Philippians 1, he says, for me to live is Christ, to die is gain. There is an old chorus, the first line of which goes like this, the greatest thing in all my life is knowing you, Jesus.

What is the greatest thing in your life? Bank balance, pleasures, status, relationship, career, family, marriage, church, or is it Jesus?

That's how to measure our attitude to Christ and whether it's cold, lukewarm, or hot. When we go home after the service, let's examine ourselves in the sober light of prayer and scripture.

Let's settle the question in our hearts. Am I lukewarm in my attitude to Jesus? Are there other things I'm putting before him in my life?

And if so, let's go straight to him for help. To see the true riches of a relationship with him. A church that's lukewarm.

[19:32] Well, secondly, and more briefly, a church that's loved. A church that's loved. When I was a child, I hated being disciplined by my parents.

It made me question whether they loved me or not, especially when my pocket money had been denied. You know, I'd been shouted at or given a kick up the backside. But as I grew up, I realized they disciplined me, of course, because they loved me.

That's why we discipline our kids, isn't it? We love them. Jesus says, those whom I love, I reprove and discipline.

To reprove is to bring something to light, to expose it, to express strong disapproval of it. even though they are apathetic toward him, Christ loves them.

And he will never stop loving them, no matter what they do or what they don't do. Not just because it's in his nature to love, but because he has committed himself in covenant promise to loving them always.

[20:36] If Jesus was as apathetic toward them as they were toward him, he'd say nothing. He'd just let them get on with being wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked in his eyes. However, he loves them.

And he wants them to reach their full potential in him and to enjoy the fullness of life in God. And so he says to them, he says, be zealous and repent.

Jesus is calling upon them to take what he's saying to them very seriously indeed. To be even more serious about him than they are about any other area of their lives, their wealth, their appearance, their comfort.

how much time and energy do we spend on getting to know Jesus better? Do we give to Jesus only the dregs, the leftovers of our days?

Or does he get the best of us? Perhaps it's time to turn our lives around to repent and to go God's way, not ours, to pray that we would see things from his perspective and not ours.

[21:41] What is our wealth anyway? We cannot take it with us when we die. What is our reputation and status really worth anyway?

It is God's view of us which is of first importance as Christians. What are our comforts and pleasures compared to the glory of the promises we enjoy and shall enjoy with Christ? It's time to get back to the basics of the cross of the resurrection to see the glorious demonstration of the infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love of God for us in his Son.

To see the security and wonder of our salvation and then to put our faith where our money is first in our lives. And then Jesus says something just absolutely marvelous.

He says, Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I'll come in to him and eat with him and he with me. To put this more literally in the tense of the Greek verbs, Behold, I've always been standing at this door and I'm knocking.

[22:53] This is not a text for those who are not Christians as much as it is a text for those who are. We know from experience as Christians it is entirely possible for Jesus to be on the outside of our lives displaced by the pleasures, comforts, and distractions.

We know it to be true as Christians, right? How easy it is for this to happen. Generally, our Christian lives begin with an albeit euphoric high of joy and love and peace, these amazing emotions.

But within the space of a few weeks other things begin to crowd in upon us and we lose that first euphoria. It wanes, it fades, it dissipates. We almost can't remember how it feels to be zealous for Christ.

Like the church in Ephesus, we've lost our first love but we never got it back. And since then we've experienced nothing of what it means to be joyful of the Lord.

Not because there's some obvious sin in our lives but simply because we've been squeezed into this world's mold. We have not transformed our world, we have been transformed by our world and all that's left to us is a Christianized worldliness where the only difference between us and those who are not Christians is that we go to church on a Sunday morning and they don't.

[24:23] The risen Christ is knocking on the doors of our hearts and he is winsomely seeking entrance so that he and we can have intimate fellowship loving fellowship and the joy of our salvation once again.

He knocks every time the word of the gospel is preached and an invitation is made to trust more deeply in him. He knocks every time the Holy Spirit convicts us of how very much far away we've strayed from him.

He knocks every time a life-changing situation comes into our lives calling us to turn to him. He knocks every time the sacrament is distributed calling us to remember his death until he comes. He knocks every time we meet a godly Christian and eagerly desire to have what they have for ourselves. He knocks every time we think of our mortality and our death.

Jesus continues to knock. even even now do you hear his knock drawing you away from the distractions of this fallen world toward his glorious person and his loving work.

[25:40] Jesus loves the church and he loves every Christian in the church and he longs for us even if we don't long for him. If he didn't and if he wasn't he wouldn't still be knocking at the door of our hearts.

What a promise awaits us if we should repent and return to him if we should be well at apathy and long for that spiritual zestiness once more. Jesus promises us saying the one who conquers I will grant to sit with me on my throne as I also conquered and sat down with my father on his throne. Isn't this a greater status than anything this world can afford us? Isn't this a greater wealth? Isn't this a greater distinction? That we should sit with Jesus forever on the throne of the glory of his father? And he seems to be saying here do you not think that we can sit on earthly thrones or we can sit on heavenly thrones but both we cannot sit upon.

We must make our choice whether to have Jesus or the world. We cannot have some of him without having all of him. We cannot have some of him without having all of him.

[27:07] We can be Lerelean about the football scores of the Cambodian women's third division league but we cannot be Lerelean about Jesus.

Do you love him? Do you love him? Surely the answer today is yes. But surely also the answer for all of us is this well not enough.

I wish I loved him more. We can never get enough of Jesus in this life and it's he who we want more than anything else this world has to offer it he we want.

At the end of the day it's not our attitude to this church which matters it's our attitude to Jesus that matters and as the faithful and true witness he knows how we feel about him today.

Sometimes and this is one of those times we're left with nowhere else to turn but to deal with the issue at hand.

[28:13] We can't put it off. We've got to settle this thing once and for all right? Are we happy with lukewarm Christianity? Are we happy with just being kind of half hearted about Jesus?

Really? Or has the time come today to get seamless about our faith in him? Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we come to you and we confess that we do love you, but we would love you more. We want to love you more. And we depend of putting other things before you in our lives.

Our desire for all these things the world throws at us. Wealth and status and comfort and pleasure security and relationship and family.

Lord Jesus, we pray that you would come first before anything. We pray, O Holy Spirit, that you would work in our hearts to point us to Jesus today, that we may do business with him.

[29:26] We pray, O Father, that you would bring all the glory to yourself for the intimacy of our faith in Jesus, so that you one God, three in one, in Jesus name we pray, Amen.