

The church at Laodicea

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 April 2015

Preacher: Donald A Macdonald

[0 : 00] Let us now turn to the passage of scripture that we read, Book of Revelation and Chapter 3. And we may read again at verse 15 and at verse 19.

Revelation chapter 3 at verse 15 and verse 19. I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot. So, or be zealous therefore, and repent. I think that this particular letter addressed to the Laodicean Church tells us something about the, or want of a better phrase, of the spiritually sensitive taste buds of the Lord Jesus Christ.

For we are told in this letter that his instinct is, in the authorized version it is to spew out of his mouth, or in the English Standard Version to spit out of his mouth, a church that does not provide refreshment.

This letter, originally written to the church in Laodicea, but in my view ought not to be confined exclusively to Laodicea.

[1 : 45] In other words, I believe that the letter still has relevance to the wider church and to Christians in the following centuries.

We know from Paul's letter to the Colossians, that there was a close link between the church at Colossae and the then church of Laodicea.

And Paul tells us, In writing to the church at Colossae, I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea.

And that tells you the particular burden that the Apostle had for both of these churches along with other churches.

Well, for a few moments this evening, I'd like to look with you at the assessment of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, as he puts his finger on the pulse of the Laodicean Church and also upon our spiritual pulse too.

[3 : 04] I'd like just to share four thoughts. First of all, the assessment of the Divine Assessor. And secondly, the reason for the lukewarmness of their spiritual life.

Thirdly, the loving exhortation that is given. And finally, the precious promise that is made. It is a conditional promise.

First then, the assessment of the Divine Assessor. I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. And does it strike you as kind of strange, the language that is used by the Lord? You are neither cold nor hot.

Would that you were either cold or hot. Or as it is in the authorized person, I would, though were it cold or hot. The Church is lukewarm.

[4 : 14] And it is more than likely that Jesus is applying, in his assessment, applying from their knowledge that would be familiar to them, the kind of water that you would find in this particular area.

It was not the most refreshing type of drink that you might wish to take. You know, when you are thirsty, and you fill a glass with water and put it to your mouth, and you are expecting a cool drink, a refreshing drink, and you discover it is lukewarm for one reason or another.

Perhaps your heating system interferes with your cold water supply. And you discover it is lukewarm. You would find it extremely unpleasant, and you would be inclined to spit it out.

It would not refresh or quench your thirst. And if you were very cold and desirous of a hot drink, then you would not wish that hot drink to be lukewarm.

If you are fond of tea, you would want a good, hot cup of tea. You wouldn't want it to be lukewarm. Again, you would probably spit it out.

[5 : 49] Well, that is something similar. Here, only it speaks of very weighty spiritual matters.

It is more serious than the mere desire. For a cold or a hot drink. There is something very solemn about the assessment that is made by the divine assessor.

Now, you might perhaps think that you would have said, would that you were hot. I don't think that we are meant to equate the language that he uses here.

In other words, either cold, to mean spiritually dead, and hot, to mean spiritually alive, but that the divine assessor is seeking refreshing and communion with the church at Laodicea.

And his sensitive spiritual taste buds do not find what he seeks amongst the fellowship of this church.

[6 : 58] And so when he addresses her, he has nothing good or encouraging to say about her. Nor does he hide his distaste.

But he speaks the truth. And he does it in love. As many as I love, he tells us, I rebuke and chasten. It's not easy to experience chastening, is it? This letter keeps nothing back.

He doesn't come with flattering words. But he speaks as a true friend. And the scripture reminds us, in the book of Proverbs, that faithful are the wounds of a friend.

We don't always appreciate such wounding, if at all. In fact, we may even resent that kind of speaking.

[8 : 02] And these words, it seems to me, were meant deliberately to wound in order to heal. They weren't meant to wound just for the sake of wounding.

You know, some people can use language very sarcastically and hurt people very badly. And they mean to hurt. And that is the point of the language that is used.

That is not the point of the message healed. It is not simply a message to wound, period. It is a message to wound in order to heal.

So that people come to a realization of the gravity of their spiritual relationship with Christ at this particular moment.

Yes, the wounds of a friend are faithful. And yet, you notice that Jesus doesn't say to this church that they don't believe the teachings of the Bible, or that they are not receiving scriptural teaching.

[9 : 18] They hear the word expounded as far as we know. There is no indication that this church is subscribed to heresy.

And yet, there is no spiritual refreshing to be found in the fellowship of this church. And the more you ponder what he says, it seems to me, the more serious the matter appears.

And does it not raise questions for ourselves as a branch of the church of Christ in the world?

How are we viewed by the divine assessor? How are we viewed as neither cold nor hot? Are we just lukewarm?

If you look at the standard of Christian life in general, and then you look deep into our own hearts, sometimes we don't like to look into our own hearts because of what is revealed there.

[10 : 33] We don't like to face the ugliness of the interior of our heart. And sometimes it seems to me that the line between the church and the world is kind of blurred.

It ought not to be blurred. There ought to be a very definite line between those in Christ and those out of Christ.

There ought to be a definite difference between those who profess Christ and those who don't. And so you see, the relevance of the assessment that is made here is something that ought to make us stop and think and ask, how is my life lived?

In the light of the assessment of Scripture, is it a life that is very different and marked? Or is it a life that is lived like the world?

It reminds me of a story I read once, and it was a book of sermons published by the late Reverend Donald MacDonald, who used to be minister of Greyfriars in Vernais.

[11 : 58] And in that book, if my memory serves me right, he tells the story of an employer who was interviewing a coach driver.

And a coach then was not a bus as we have today, but horses and a coach. And the question that he asked those who were applying for the job, how close would you drive to the edge of the road?

And the first person who was interviewed said, well, he would go so close to the edge of the road.

And then the next person who was interviewed, he would even go closer to the edge of the road.

Finally, this person was interviewed and he said, I would keep as far away from the edge of the road as possible. I would remain in the center of the road. And you see, there is the danger that we try to live like the world rather than live like those who are called to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

You remember the question that was posed by the prophet Micah, should this be said by the Lord? Through the prophet Micah, should this be said, O house of Jacob, has the Lord grown impatient? [13:23] Are these his deeds? And so, as we look at church life in general, I'm not highlighting congregations, but church life in general.

The slow progress of the gospel among us as a generation. And ask yourself the question, is the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the church in general?

Or are we something like those who are neither cold nor hot? Do we not need to hear the voice of the faithful and true witness saying to us, I know your works.

You are neither cold nor hot. There is a great danger that we may have a certain lukewarmness about ourselves.

You know, when you put iron into a bar of iron into a very hot fire, it turns white in the heat.

[14:42] But you take it out of that fire and leave it lying on the ground. And in a short time, you will see a scale cover coming over it.

and it will be as cold as it was before it was heated up. So we need spiritual warmth to counteract the lukewarmness that may beset us as a generation and as a church.

Laodicea was a place that was prosperous, a commercial city, place where there was trade.

And that perhaps adds to the picture that is given to us here. And there is always the danger that the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the world and it grows unfruitful.

these are the weeds that choke and leave the world unfruitful. Now, yes, we have to we have to work to earn.

[16:03] Even pensioners have to work to earn their crust of bread. We have to work to earn. But are we letting the things of this world have the priority in our lives so that the things of God have a secondary place in our hearts and in our minds.

Remember, the believer is the salt of the earth. And if the salt loses its savor, wherewith shall it be salted? How are we going to have an influence on the world in which Christ has placed us for a very short time?

Where we are called to be witnesses and testify to the power of redemptive grace in our hearts and lives so that we seek to reflect the Christ who has called us.

Neither cold nor hot. And the reason for this lukewarmness is my second point. It seems to me that there was an air of complacency about Laodicea.

You know, you cannot roll out the elements of self-satisfaction and self-reliance. Look at her own assessment of where she stood.

[17:36] I am rich. I have prospered and I need nothing. In other words, things are going well. The church is thriving in her own estimation.

And perhaps we could apply that to our own denomination. We are increasing as a denomination. We have more congregations than ever. We have more ministers. We are prospering at a local level.

We have Sunday schools. We have youth fellowships. We have women for mission. We have care for the community. We have office payers.

We have money coming in. Everything seems on the face of it to be flourishing. We have a good name in the community.

Could not Laodicea say the same? Now, when I say that, I am saying it to myself as much as I am saying it to you.

[18:44] We can have all of that. And that was what left this church neither cold nor hot. They were self-satisfied and self-reliant.

And the irony is that that exposes them to greater danger and poverty because they have no sense of their true need. They are not able to admit their lack of power and helplessness and turn to Christ.

The word of God, the preaching of the gospel wasn't stimulating that kind of war in their lives that characterized the two on the road to Emmaus.

You remember how those two on the road to Emmaus, how their hearts were stirred and gripped by the exposition of the truth that was given to them by the stranger who stepped out of the shadows of the Emmaus world.

And how that set their hearts on fire so that we are told their hearts burned within them.

[20 : 06] Let me ask you, friend, how, when did your heart last burn through the proclamation of truth?

When did you have that experience of heart burning in your life? Maybe you'll tell me you had it just last Sunday.

I hope you did. But ask yourself and answer the question honestly, when did the word of God set you on fire?

When did it grip your heart? When did it fire your energies to live more closely with Christ? When did it provoke and stimulate the response of a closer walk with thee?

Or did you just come and go? You see, complacent and self satisfied. Now, I am well persuaded that you are under the preaching, powerful preaching.

[21 : 20] Is it setting your heart on fire? Is it really firing your energies for Christ? Well, look at the contrast.

Here is a church who are almost an ear of smugness in their complacency. And the faithful and true witness says, you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

That is the real state. That is the truth. God would preserve us from this complacent self-satisfaction and self-reliance.

And then you ask yourself the question, how on earth could these two assessments be so totally different? And the only answer that you can come up with is the ignorance of the church of Laodicea.

You know not that you are wretched. You do not realize that you are wretched. There is a failure on the part of this church to grasp her true spiritual condition.

[22 : 44] She wasn't as it were conducting self-examination in the light of truth. she was blind to her true condition.

Deceived if you like as to her true condition. She is not acting hypocritically I don't believe. The hypocrite pretends to be something they are not.

I don't believe that is what the church at Laodicea was doing. But she was deceived. Deceived as to her true spiritual state.

because of her failure to carry out the kind of self examination that brings us face to face with the demanding challenging standards of the word of God.

Oh well can we not be like that too? And you want to say that you don't want to be like that.

[23 : 53] Blinded by our ignorance of our true spiritual condition. Well you remember the apostle Paul he busted he busted in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ and he goes on to tell us by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

That is always the danger I am rich I have prospered I need nothing. Thanking that we have gone beyond where we are refusing to recognize how impoverished we are by the power of indwelling sin.

And that brings me to my third point the loving exhortation that is given so be zealous or as it is here be zealous therefore and repent.

The word that is used here for zealous or zeal is a word that could literally mean be boiling with heat or to boil with fervor heart.

Now that doesn't mean to say that we create some kind of or work up some kind of emotion that would be a kind of counterfeit of what the zeal that is spoken of here.

[25 : 37] Often there is a counterfeit of many things that are spoken of in the word of God. But it seems to me that the exhortation that is given here to be zealous is one that comes from careful meditation on the word of God.

Looking to the Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds and our hearts as we read the truth so that we are gripped by the teachings of the word of God and as a consequence that we are filled with the zeal that is spoken of here.

You notice that the exhortation to zeal is preceded by a whole series of considerations. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire and white garments and so on.

And anoint your eyes with eyes half. In other words he is saying lay hold of the truths that are in Christ Jesus.

There is a storehouse that is ever full that is ever rich that is relevant to our needs as those who come just like the brothers of Joseph came down to Egypt they came with empty socks.

[27 : 22] That's how we ought to come to the rich storehouses of divine grace with empty socks in order that the elder brother might fill them for us just as Joseph filled these socks for his brothers coming in our emptiness to the fullness of Christ.

And you notice you are to buy in other words to receive it's not it's the marketplace of of grace it's the kind of language that is used by the prophet Isaiah when he is saying I come when he exhorts those who are thirsty to come and to buy wine and milk without money and without price in other words to receive the provision that God has laid up in Christ Jesus for us and yet seems to me there is a difference here I counsel you to buy of me gold and white raiment but he doesn't say to buy the I salve and I may be misreading this but it seems to me there is a distinction made here that the I salve or the salve to anoint your eyes is something that they possess already and that they are commanded to use it in other words to make use of the gift that has already been given to them as those who are indwelt by the spirit of

God in order that their spiritual vision and sight may be enlarged so that they come to a true perspective of themselves and of the one who is addressing them here are people who are so self conceited so happy with their own spiritual condition and blind to the true facts that they were miserable and poor and naked in other words recognize your true state do not live in a dream world in a world of illusion it's almost like being in a drug induced utopia where you believe that everything is fine as long as you have the supply of the drug that induces that kind of utopian feeling rather than facing to the stark facts that you are blind and miserable and naked and poor that you require clothing and feeding and enriching from the only one who can give you who can give you that it is a very sobering picture it seems to me of how wrong we can be in our assessment of our spiritual state feed upon the great truths of the gospel that kindle zeal now zeal always requires knowledge reminds me of a story

I heard a long long time ago those of you who are of my vintage will remember wheel to wheel tapes it's difficult to get them today and my regret is that the store of knowledge I had on them as a youth they have been lost to me because on these wheel to wheel tapes I had what in my view was precious a precious store and amongst it there was this anecdote that was told by a minister who was personalizing zeal and knowledge and he spoke in this way about zeal and knowledge that zeal went out full of confidence brimful of confidence but he returned later in the day despondent discouraged downcast and knowledge asked zeal the question why are you so dispirited and so downcast and despondent and zeal responded

I cut the ear of Malchus the servant of the high priest priest and the minister was using the life of Peter to illustrate the story however shortly afterwards zeal went out again just as confident just as self assertive and zeal returned the end of the next day even more despondent than ever and when asked by knowledge why zeal was so despondent the response was I denied my lord three times I denied my lord and so knowledge makes a proposal let us get married and zeal and knowledge became united in marriage so that they went out together as one and zeal the zeal that is commended in the context here is a zeal that needs to be tempered with knowledge in order to prevent us from making the kind of catastrophic judgments that zeal is inclined to make on its own be zealous therefore and repent in other words turn around and perhaps you're saying oh but [34 : 19] I repented 20 years ago or 30 years ago well if you haven't repented since then it's time you started repentance is part of the daily life of the believer as they go through this world it's not a one off experience it's something that ought to be in the life of the believer every day the element of repentance and we have much to repent of do we not every day and where where there is as it were a breaking out of power spiritual power it's very often preceded by true repentance where there is a turning from the way that we pursued towards

God perhaps a fresh beginning might be a way of looking at it in this context in the life of the Laodicean church you remember when Abraham went down into Egypt and the disastrous consequences or results of his visit into Egypt and when he came back from Egypt we are told he journeyed on from Negev as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning between Bethel and Ai to the other place where he had made an altar at the first and there we are told Abraham called upon the name of the Lord and it seems to me that there is that the element of repentance of a new beginning in the life of

Abraham you know if you are here tonight and your life has been inconsistent as a Christian there is still time to make this new beginning and this break with the past in order that there is this evidence of repentance where we are turning to Christ and turning from our sin what does it matter if people

say to you what they said about the apostle Paul that he was mad that he was insane because of the zeal that he displayed in the cause of Christ in the world or what does it matter how people might view you from that point of view as long as God is glorified should it not be true of us as it was true of

Christ and of the psalmist the zeal of your house has eaten him up and that brings us to my last point the precious promise that is made often perhaps we use this verse of scripture verse 20 to preach an evangelistic psalm but in the context here it is spoken to the believer and to the church 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 oh is there is there a compulsion in our hearts to have Christ in our midst rather than leaving him outside is there that hunger for his fellowship is there that hunger for communion with himself in our hearts so that we don't want him outside but we want him right in the middle of the fellowship central to our worship you see on this promise that is so rich and so full and so pregnant with meaning

I will come into him I will dwell in him so that he comes in to our emptiness with his fullness into our sinfulness with his righteousness I will come in with him and eat with him remember it is the apostle John who is writing these words as they are given to him by the spirit of God he is one who knew what it was to share intimacy of fellowship and communion with Christ during Christ's earthly ministry the disciple whom Jesus loved the one who reclined a table at Jesus side and it may be that as

[40 : 16] John wrote these words he perhaps remembered the upper room experience where even amongst the bitter facts that were set before them and which they failed to grasp at that time that there was also a strange joy and a peacefulness and so here he is speaking truly of fellowship with Christ he will come in yes he comes in as a welcomed guest but when he comes in as a welcomed guest he acts the part of the host you remember when he the two that he met on the road to Emmaus and how they constrained him to remain with them there was this inner compulsion on their part because of the valuation that they placed on the fellowship and communion that they were enjoying with

Christ he came in with them and he played the part of the host he yielded to their persistent asking and he acted the part of the host oh how blessed it is to share in that fellowship and communion with the Lord Jesus Christ you see even the fact that this church had come to such a pitiable condition did not preclude that Christ would come in should there be that turning around should there be that seeking and that inner compulsion for the fellowship and communion of the Lord yes it sets before you a picture of intimacy a picture of blessedness a picture of sweet communion with Christ and even now Christ can sit with us you remember there is a certain sense in which our eating with Christ here is something like the children of Israel when they observed the Passover meal you remember the instructions that they were given you shall eat it with your belt fastened your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand you shall eat it in haste why because the wilderness had still to be walked and there is a peculiar sense in which we still have to traverse the wilderness be it long or short it will be short even at the longest but yet it is but a prelude to an intimacy of communion from which there will be no disruption and no separation where you will be at the table with

Christ in harmony forever and ever and you will never tire of his fellowship and communion your earthly frame which now lets you down will never be tired in that place where Christ receives and welcomes us all and where he blesses them with the intimacy of his fellowship in that place where they eat together the assessment of the divine assessor neither cold nor hot the reason for this lukewarmness the air of complacency self reliance I am rich and prospered and need nothing the loving exhortation that is given be zealous and repent the precious promise that is made I will come into he opens the door and eat with him and he with me may God grant that it be such a time of fellowship and blessedness and communion as you go through the days of the communion season that you know indeed that Christ has come in with you and that you are in his fellowship and his presence let us pray oh