

True Zeal: Laodicea

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Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

[0 : 00] Please have your Bibles open at the passage we've just heard read, page 229 in the New Testament section of our Bibles, Revelation chapter 3, verses 14 through 22, a letter of our Lord Jesus to the Laodiceans.

It's the seventh letter in the series which fills Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

And in a real sense it's a climax of the whole series. It certainly contains the two best known verses in the book of Revelation. If you asked people where in the New Testament does Jesus tell a church that he finds them lukewarm and they're a bad taste in his mouth and he's inclined to spit them out, people will, I think, in most cases know that it's Revelation chapter 3 and verse 16, part of the letter to Laodicea, that's being referred to.

If again you ask people where in the New Testament does it say that Jesus stands and knocks at the door and is waiting outside the door until we open it and says if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and eat, drink with that person.

Well again, most people would know that that's Revelation chapter 3 and verse 20, and it's also part of what the Lord Jesus says to the church at Laodicea.

[1 : 51] What you've actually got in this letter, as we shall see, is the gravest warning to a slipping church that you've got anywhere in this series of letters, and also the richest promise that you've got anywhere in this series of letters of the church that you've got.

The biggest promise that you've got in this series of letters of the church that you've got in this series of letters of the Lord's voice and turns back to him. For that promise that I quoted just now is a promise of the closest fellowship you can conceive between the sinner and the Savior here and hereafter.

eating and drinking together is the Bible picture of closest intimacy because it was at the meal table that people ordinarily enjoyed their closest fellowship in that world.

Well, this is the passage that we're going to dig into. There are things here we must look at and lessons that we must learn. Let me remind you, these letters are pastoral letters from the Lord to the churches, but they're written like business letters.

They all have the same form, and they come from the Lord as, so to speak, the boss on a tour of inspection of the churches, if one dare put it that way.

[3 : 24] And each of them begins with an assessment, what the Lord thinks about the church, and goes on to an analysis, the Lord telling us in detail what he sees as he looks at the church.

And from that, Jesus moves on to admonition, telling the church what they must do to please him in future. And then right at the end of the letter, there's an assurance given, a promise, an encouragement to telling the folk what they have to look forward to if they battle and overcome the world and the devil standing against them, and in the strength of the Lord Jesus end up conquerors.

And it was a fifth century theologian who observed when Christ wrote to these seven churches, he wrote to all churches.

And it's for us to note what Jesus says to these churches, and to ask ourselves if that's what he said to them then, what would he have to say to us about ourselves here and now?

Well, with that sense of what's going on, let's turn to this letter to Laodicea. Some things we should know about Laodicea as we explore the letter, because they're referred to, actually, in the images and illustrations that the Savior uses here.

[5 : 15] Laodicea was literally one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world. It was a great commercial center.

It was a center for banking and finance houses. It was a center for the manufacture of textiles. It was in the midst of an area where there were black sheep in great numbers.

And the textile industry was a matter of weaving black garments out of the wool of the sheep. And it was big business.

And they had a medical school. And they manufactured, I was going to say medications, I should say pharmaceuticals. Because the chief product here was what was called Phrygian eye ointment, taken and sold all over the Roman Empire.

It was supposed to be very good for the eyes. And near to Laodicea, there was what we would call a spa, a warm spring.

[6 : 32] The water wasn't hot. It wasn't cold. It came out lukewarm. I'm told it still does. It came out tasting like spa water very often does taste, that is dreadful.

Because of the minerals that were dissolved in it. Not many folk actually could drink it. Again, I'm told that the spring still bubbles and the water still tastes dreadful.

Well, okay. But that's part of the scene and Jesus is referring to that. So we do need to have it in our minds. Generally, here's Laodicea, an upbeat city.

A very prosperous urban center. A city that's extremely pleased with itself. A city that's extremely pleased with itself. And you can't even, you can't wonder if that spirit of complacency and contentment got into the churches.

For the church, the one church, perhaps, as it was. And that brings us to what the Lord has to say about this church.

[7 : 46] Which, as you noticed when the lesson was read to us, was not at all complimentary. There are three things here that we have to note, have to understand.

The Packer mind, as some of you will know by now, switches whenever it's given a chance into alliteration.

And what popped up in my mind was three words beginning with D to focus on the things we have to understand. The disgust of the Lord.

The disaster in the Laodicean church. And the discipline which the Lord, in love, calls the church to accept.

And we start with the disgust. The disgust that's expressed by Jesus in verses 15 and 16.

[8 : 48] I know your works, that is, your track record. I've watched you. You are neither cold nor hot. The way you behave together shows that.

Would that you were cold or hot. But because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot. I have a mind. This would be the literal translation of the Greek.

I have a mind. I am inclined to spit you out of my mouth. You will agree that's rough talk. It would be devastating if we, any of us, came to think that this is what the Lord is saying to us.

It would be devastating if we came to think that this is what the Lord is saying to our congregation here at St. John's. But let's face the fact that the real Christ, the Christ of the scriptures, the Christ with whom we have to deal, is a savior who, though he's wonderfully gentle with the weak and the helpless when he's ministering to them, is also terribly fierce with the self-righteous and the self-satisfied as the Laodiceans actually were.

Remember the words which Jesus spoke in the days of his flesh to the scribes and the Pharisees. They were the self-righteous, self-satisfied people that he was directly up against.

[10 : 34] And things that he said to them were terribly, terribly fierce. There was love mind behind his words. He spoke in this way in order to jolt them awake. And when he speaks sternly to the Laodicean church, his purpose is the same.

But yes, he is terribly fierce in the things he says. You say, what's the problem? What is it that has produced such a violent reaction in Jesus?

The answer is that the Laodiceans had a very mediocre church. Church life. But they thought they were marvelous.

They had a high opinion of themselves. They were confident Christians, although they were casual Christians. They weren't taking their discipleship very seriously.

But nonetheless, they were quite contented. They thought they were doing fine. If you'd asked them how things were going in their church, they would have said, very well.

[11 : 41] Everything's all right. We're doing great. And they didn't realize the things that Christ has to tell them, does tell them, that they were living hollow Christian lives in which there was no fellowship between him and them because they weren't seeking him.

No wonder then that they weren't in touch with him. They were living Christian lives without zeal. Wait a minute, you say, what exactly does that mean?

Zeal isn't a word that I'm too familiar with. Well, no. In modern life, we don't use it very often, I don't think. But zeal is an attitude which scripture often points to.

And once again, you must excuse the Packer propensity for artful alliteration. It came to me like this. Zeal is pursuing one's purpose with passionate persistence, refusing to let anything stop you, putting first things first.

And, well, if it means that you upset people, if it means that you bewilder them, that they don't know what to make of you, well, it doesn't make any difference to you because you know what you're after.

[13 : 18] And this is the first concern of your life. You are zealous about it. You're showing zeal in pursuing it. And like Jesus did, do you remember? Very early on in his ministry, first time he went to Jerusalem, apparently, when he went into the temple and he made a whip.

And do you recall what he did with it? He drove out of the temple the people who were selling animals for sacrifice, drove out the sheep and oxen together with the people selling them, and he poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their temples, and he told those who sold the pigeons, take these things away.

You shall not make my father's house a house of trade. That's not what the temple is for. It's for worship, not for financial dealing and making money.

And the disciples, we're told, John, who wrote this, was one of them, they remembered that it was written, zeal, yes, there it is, zeal for thy house will consume me.

Yeah, that's zeal. You see it? It's the very opposite of the laid-back way of drifting along, patting yourself on the back, and saying, I'm doing great.

[14 : 47] Well, but that was the problem at Laodicea. That's exactly how the church was living. Formal, going through the motions of worship and so on, but half-hearted.

Lukewarm, that's Jesus' word for it, and you can see how it fits. You know, Pentecostals and such, often say this about some Anglicans, anyway, that they are formal, and they're half-hearted, and they're lukewarm.

And alas, there are many Anglicans of whom it's true. Whereas Pentecostals, as we all know, they may sometimes make us wonder about their wisdom, but there's no question about their zeal.

They are passionately committed to extending the kingdom, honoring the Lord, worshiping Him, adoring Him, celebrating Him, and making Him known to others.

Well, that's zeal. And before, as Anglicans, we look down our noses when we look in the Pentecostal direction, remember, they've got zeal, and some of us haven't.

[16 : 17] Just like the Laodiceans. Well, Jesus tells us He's repelled by what He sees. Repelled, as I suppose you and I would be repelled if we went out into the yard and we could smell a skunk.

And Jesus puts it in terms of how one feels when water full of minerals gets into the mouth. It tastes horrible.

You want to spit it out. He's disgusted. All right. Learn the lesson, friends. He is a Savior who gets disgusted when He sees half-heartedness where zeal ought to be.

And on to the next thing now. The disaster that had happened at Laodicea in verse 17, if you glance at it, you've got Jesus diagnosing exactly what's wrong.

You say, this is what you think about yourselves. You say, I am rich. Well, yes, it was a prosperous city.

[17 : 23] And the sense of being materially prosperous obviously had infected the minds and the hearts of the church so that its members thought, ah, yes, we live in Laodicea.

We must be spiritually prosperous too because look how God blesses the term. I have prospered. Did you say that? The Greek word actually means I have made money.

And those who have made money and have seen their investments increase, they too are tempted, very strongly tempted to rest on their oars and say, well, this is great.

God's giving me a wonderful, easy life. Okay, I'll enjoy it. And any zeal that was there before goes out of the window. And what Jesus has to say about those who think of themselves, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.

Yes, this is the self-sufficiency, you see, of a great financial center like Laodicea. And the spirit of self-sufficiency has got into the church as well.

[18 : 48] And Jesus tells them, friends, you are self-deceived in your self-satisfaction and your self-sufficiency, the idea that you are doing all right because you're not.

You don't know, this is the second half of the verse, that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Those last three words in particular are vivid words.

The word translated poor is stronger than that. It actually means destitute. Spiritually, you're on skid row. That's what he's telling them. And you're blind.

Well, that's a real affliction. You can't see your way. You can't see your savior. You can't see your need. You can't see any of the things you need to see.

You're blind. And you're naked, he says. And to be naked in public is a source of shame. You are in a shameful condition.

[20 : 01] That's what Jesus is putting to them in this vivid utterance. And the statements are intended, the worst Lord's statements are intended to shake them rigid, as you can see.

Actually, when he talks about being destitute and blind and naked, he's not saying anything more than is true of everybody in our natural condition.

Because we are born sinners. Sin has infected the whole human race ever since the fall. And we all of us, by nature, are like this.

Spiritually, we've got nothing. We can't see how miserable we are. We can't see the way. And when we hear the gospel of Christ, at first, we don't see him and his glory and his love.

No, we're blind. And we need God to visit us and enlighten us. Just as we need the Lord to come near us and offer us a salvation, a gift of salvation that covers our nakedness and so takes us beyond our state of shame.

[21 : 33] And there are people, even in the churches, alas, who have never grasped this. Well, you can see, it would be a disaster for you or me, if that was true of us.

And it's certainly a disaster to a whole congregation when they're unrealistic spiritually in this way. And they need wealth because they've got none.

They need sight because they're blind. And they need something to cover their shame. And they've got nothing. And they don't seem to realize how great and how grievous their need is.

Well, we are intended to learn from this letter that we, all of us, have this need by nature.

And it's only the Lord Jesus Christ who can meet it. And that takes us on to the third thing, the discipline, which in love the Lord imposes on Laodicea and all Christians, professedly, all congregations claiming to be Christian that are like the Laodicean church.

[22 : 51] Yes, it is love. Jesus explicitly says so. The words so far are stern. The statement that I have a mind to spit you out of your mouth is calculated to send a cold shiver down your spine.

But it's love that's speaking, love that is seeking to shock people awake. And Jesus says in verse 19, so that we won't misunderstand, those whom I love I reprove and chasten.

It's out of love that I'm speaking to you, he says, in this way. Chasten could be, is a word that could better, I think, be translated discipline.

here anyway, is Jesus telling them what they need to do to get themselves put right.

And once again, the alliterative habit of mine kicks in and I tell you, Jesus speaks of four things, they all belong together, they're all part of a single block of advice and admonition and invitation.

[24 : 13] Because that, as you'll see, is what they are. But they can all of them be expressed by the use of a word beginning with R and perhaps that makes it easier to remember them than it would otherwise be.

First thing you've got to do, says Jesus, you must request from me what you lack. Look back to verse 18. I counsel you to buy from me.

He says buy because, as I said, Laodicea is a commercial center where buying and selling went on all the time. But what he's talking about is the receiving of free gifts.

You buy without money and without price, as Isaiah puts it somewhere. When you look to Jesus, and request from him what you need in order to be put spiritually straight.

He loves to give and he gives freely. The only question is whether we will recognize our need and receive from him what he gives.

[25 : 23] What does he specify here? Well, it's very vivid. In this financial center, he says, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire that you may be rich.

You thought you were, but you're spiritually destitute. What's the gift he's talking about? The true wealth of saving grace, that's for sure.

That's what brings real spiritual wealth in this world. God. And he says, you need, I counsel you to buy from me white garments to clothe you.

Keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen. If you've got any sense of reality and fitness, when I tell you that you're naked in public, your heart says, good heavens, yes, how am I to cover up?

We sometimes have bad dreams, of course, of exactly this sort. How am I to cover up? Here I am in public and I'm not wearing what I need to be wearing.

[26 : 34] Well, says Jesus, I give, I provide you with white garments to cover you up.

What are the white garments? It's the gift of righteousness. Righteousness in two senses. Righteousness to start with that means that your person is accepted, your sin is covered and you're received into the fellowship of the Father and the Son.

And then it's righteousness in the further sense of purity, the new life where you don't yield anymore to the way of complacency and self-satisfaction, which is the way of sin, the Christ-less way.

No. Now your nakedness is covered. You can walk tall. You have saving grace in Christ.

And says Jesus, with that, I counsel you to ask me for ointment, salve for your eyes, so that that blindness of yours may be healed and you may see, see me and my love, see me and my glory, see yourself and the way that you should be going if you're going to live in a way that pleases me and answers my love to you in a proper, fitting way.

[28 : 16] Let me give you these gifts, says Jesus, request them from me, for they're gifts you need and you lack. This is really Christ saying, I want you, you Laodiceans, to be in the same frame of mind as was the Apostle Paul when in Philippians chapter 3 he says, everything that was gained to me I now count as loss for Christ.

I count it as worthless that I may gain Christ and have Christ and be found in Christ not having my own righteousness the fancied righteousness which really is nothing at all when Christ takes account of it but having the righteousness that is from Christ in Christ by faith.

request from me, says Jesus, that which you lack and which you need let me minister to you in this way and second are respond to me with zeal.

Look at the second half of verse 19 and you see the Savior saying so be zealous. First things first put eternity first.

Be wholehearted in putting eternity first. Eternity is what matters. Be single minded in responding to me the lover of your soul giving yourself to me for my service serving me in fellowship for the rest of your days.

[30 : 12] Enter into this relationship and be zealous from your side in pursuing it loving me as I have loved you. And third are repent before me with understanding.

Be zealous and repent. Let it begin there. Lots of people think that there's no more to repentance than expressing regret telling God we are heartily sorry for our misdoings.

But simply to shed tears and say we are sorry and beat our breast that's only the preparation for the real heart of repentance which is doing something about it changing your plan changing your way starting to live differently right about turn quick march you were living in a way that kept Jesus at a distance and that was part of your strategy you didn't want him coming too close now repent of that and open your heart to him and let him come as close as he wants to and search you as deeply as he wants to repent give yourself to Christ for a new life and there comes the fourth R in this unforgettable picture the

Savior presents himself to you as the one who stands outside the door and you've seen of course Holman Hunt's famous picture of Christ standing outside the door the door of the individual heart and the door of the fellowship as well he stands out there knocking and you look at the door and there's no handle on the door on the outside it has to be opened from the inside and the Savior knocks and he says behold I'm standing at the door and knocking if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into him and eat with him and he with me that's a picture of the closest fellowship that can be in the Bible it's over a meal at the meal table that people have the closest intimacy that can be because well that was part of the culture that was part of the reality of a party a feast intimacy with the people who are there

I'll come in and I'll eat with you and you'll be intimate with me says the Lord Jesus and that is a relationship I promise you which will go on forever as he says he who conquers I will grant him to sit with me on my throne as I myself conquered and sat down with my father on his throne you shall be with me where I am sharing the glory that I have you can't think of a closer intimacy than that between me and my heavenly father can you so Jesus asks us as he asked the church at Laodicea and of course we have to say no that is the closest intimacy that's conceivable the closest intimacy that ever could be well he said I am in that fellowship with my father sharing his throne and you if you overcome the world and the devil who are trying to keep you away from me if you overcome them and become my zealous faithful servant well you'll be sharing my throne as

[34 : 20] I'm sharing my father's throne implicit in that is the promise of the closest intimacy with the savior for all eternity that anyone can imagine and indeed closer than that there was a time when Anglicans understood this very well and there was a bishop named Walsham Howe who put it I would say with unforgettable force in a hymn that gets left out of modern hymn books but I want you to hear what he wrote I'm reading it from the old blue book which seniors in the congregation like me will remember but a lot of you are too young ever to have seen well let me read you what bishop Walsham Howe wrote as he put into verse to be sung revelation chapter 3 verse 20 behold

I stand at the door and knock oh Jesus thou art standing outside the fast closed door in lowly patience waiting to pass the threshold o'er shame on us Christian brothers his name and sign who bear oh shame thrice shame upon us to keep him standing there oh Jesus thou art knocking and low thy hand is scarred and thorns thy brow encircle and tears thy face of marred oh love that passes knowledge so patiently to wait oh sin that has no equal so fast to bar the gate oh Jesus thou art pleading in accents meek and low I died for you my children and will you treat me so oh lord with shame and sorrow we open now the door dear savior enter enter and leave us never more may that be the word of all our hearts as we bring our message to an end he she who has an ear for the lord's sake and for your own soul's sake hear what the spirit says to the churches amen