

# Vision of Discipleship

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning, everyone. It's great to gather with you in the building and also online, if you're connected online to the St Paul's family out there, to our neighbourhood around Chatswood and community.

Great for you to be connecting in with us. Well, it's that time of year again, as a number of us are aware, where heads are buried into books, the hope of cramming in as much information as possible in order to regurgitate it onto an exam paper, whether it be HSC, uni exams, as some of us here are facing theological exams.

It's that time of year of assessment. Someone was asked recently what, in fact, there was their plan of attack for the exam, and their response was, I am hoping to try not to cry loud enough in order to disturb other people.

While there are, this time of year, exams like this, these assessment periods, in actual fact, all of life, on one way or another, is an assessment. From the time that you're born, and the doctors or the nurses are measuring you and poking you and prodding you and weighing you and making sure that you're hitting all the appropriate milestones, your head's not too big, it's not too small, you're walking when you're meant to walk, you're moving, you're doing all that sort of stuff.

Through the various stages, to the point where you're getting a car licence, you've got to do exams, you've got to pass certain things, driving tests, written tests. For me, it went on from that into commercial driving licence with heavy vehicles, explosive licence, firearm licence, motorbike licence, it's assessments all the way through.

[ 1 : 44 ] Now that I'm a diabetic, I'm on a constant cycle of blood tests, I test my sugar levels, I don't know how many times a day, physical examinations, eye examinations. Now there's a whole heap of assessments that happen in life, some of them are really crucial, some of them, really frankly, it doesn't matter, you know, who cares what you got on your second grade piano exam, no one really matters about that, unless of course, you know, it's your teacher.

And even every five years, the church itself gets assessed with the National Church Life Survey, which will be coming up for us again next year.

And in one sense, this is what we're doing in this season of St Paul's, we are assessing the last 11 years' ministry of this church. But the assessment of the church, the assessment of our lives, of our lives as disciples of the Lord Jesus, that really matters, is in fact not your assessment of the last 11 years, or my assessment, or the NCLS's, or even what our diocesan bishop, or the whole diocese thinks.

The only assessment that really matters is the one who we saw last week from Revelation 1, is the one who rules over all things from time and eternity, stands in the midst of his church, the cosmic king, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's his assessment that matters. The one who chapter 1 calls, the firstborn from the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth, the king of kings, in other words, the one to whom belongs glory and power forever and ever.

[ 3 : 22 ] Amen. Now, Revelation 2 and 3, which is what we're up to today, is Jesus' assessment of seven churches. So, grab your Bibles, Revelation 2 and 3, and also the St. Paul's app, and come with me on that.

If you have not got a Bible, can I encourage you at this point, if you've got no access to God's word right now, I've got two things for you. Bring one from home, first of all, if you've got one at home. Secondly, if you don't have one at all, then we will give you one. So, please, speak to me, speak to one of the staff here, and we will give you a Bible by the time you leave today.

I want to have a Bible in your hands. So, get your Bibles open, Revelation 2 and 3, and the St. Paul's app, four things, why the assessment matters, the results of the assessment, how to receive a positive assessment, and the hope of a positive assessment.

So, why is assessment matters? The book of Revelation is in the form of a letter that the Apostle John is writing to the church as it struggles under the weight of hardship and the affluence of the Roman Empire.

[ 4 : 43 ] And it starts with this incredible vision of the Lord Jesus Christ, who rules as the cosmic king of all things. We saw last week that this Jesus is the beginning of all things.

He's the end of all things. History is running in direction of him, and therefore, he is the point of all things. The entire book is a vision that the Apostle John receives while he himself is suffering as a servant of the Lord Jesus on the prison island, Patmos.

He is suffering because he's a follower. He's a disciple of the Lord Jesus. And John is instructed in chapter 1, verse 19 to write down, it says, what is now and what will take place later.

So if you like, the book of Revelation is God's grand narrative. It's his self-revelation of the way things actually are in the universe.

John's vision takes us beyond the chaos of history to see God's work, him working behind the scenes to defeat sin and evil and to rescue a people for himself for their eternal joy.

[ 6 : 06 ] Now, most of the book of Revelation is a vision of the heavenly realms. The cosmic battle between Satan and sin and wickedness and the final triumph of the loving rule of God for all of eternity.

So Revelation 2 and 3, what it does for us in these seven letters to the churches is it brings that cosmic battle into our daily life.

So it's not just sort of mythology kind of stuff out there in the internet. It brings that battle which is out there raging beyond our sight into our daily lives.

That is the place where the cosmic battle of Revelation gets, if you like, rages the most is in the local church and the members of the local church.

This is where the cosmic battle becomes real for us. The cosmic battle between God and all that is good and Satan and all that is evil, that battle rages for every single Christian.

[ 7 : 26 ] The battle for faithfulness and fruitfulness, a battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. Can I just add here just as a side point, it's one reason why vocational Christian ministry is so fundamentally hard.

Not only does the pastor experience the cosmic battle personally like you experience it personally, but we are leading others to overcome at the same time trying to overcome ourselves.

Revelation 2 and 3 is Jesus' assessment of seven churches and how they are progressing.

There's no such thing as a perfect performance except for Jesus. He is the victorious one. He is the one who has overcome and his concern for us is that we would triumph with him, that we too would be victorious.

that we would enter into all the joys of his eternal kingdom and experience life in its fullest as he now has life in all its fullest. That we would enter into that joy and that's why his assessment of how we're begrossing matters.

[ 8 : 41 ] matters. So these chapters are specific individual messages for real life churches that existed in the first century with the apostle John that were facing real life issues.

And yet, each of these specific messages is meant to be read to all the churches. all the churches. Each church has to know about all the issues that they will face. Every individual church here is instructed to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

churches. This is for us too here at St. Paul's Chatswood 2,000 years later. And this letter presents to us a serious picture of church life where constant vigilance is called for.

We must hear his assessment and instructions if we are to overcome and we are to be victorious in the end.

[ 9 : 58 ] So what's the results of his assessment? All the letters, the seven letters have a similar pattern. They begin with an explanation of who Jesus Christ is and each of the explanations at the beginning of each letter draws on one aspect of the vision that the apostle John saw of the Lord Jesus in chapter one.

It then goes on to describe Jesus' assessment of each church. Then following that is a word of encouragement or a word of warning and each finishes with a glorious promise to those who will

overcome and each one of the glorious promises is found in Revelation 21 and 22 at the end of what that looks like.

So he's drawing on the past who Jesus is, his character and what he is taking us to into the future in Revelation 21 and 22. These churches all face a range of issues.

Persecution, complacency, social rejection, false teaching, lovelessness, needing to refocus on its purpose and its mission, all kinds of issues.

And rather than go through them all, which you'd be glad that I'm not going to because I'm hoping that you will do that in your community groups, I want to focus on Laodicea for us.

[ 11 : 35 ] What we notice with the first six churches that Jesus addresses here is that he affirms them for some things, criticizes them for other things. There were things that they were doing well.

There were things that they needed to improve on, needed to change. Except for Smyrna and Philadelphia where there are no faults mentioned.

On the other hand, when we come to Laodicea, Jesus doesn't affirm them for anything. His assessment is quite scathing. And there is something about Laodicea and his call for Laodicea which impacts the rest of the churches and how they continue to advance.

So that's why I want to pick on Laodicea. The issue Jesus has with his church, if you've got your Bibles, Revelation 3 verses 15 and 16, I know your deeds that you are neither cold nor hot.

I wish you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.

[ 12 : 50 ] So what Jesus is addressing here in Laodicea is what you would call spiritual lukewarmness. We can see what this means when we see what it is contrasted with in verse 19.

In the second sentence of verse 19 we read, The word earnest there is translated from the word zealous in the original language.

It's the origin of the word zealous in the English language. A lukewarm Christian is a Christian without zeal for God.

Now it's interesting that if you do a word study here, this particular Greek word zealous is mostly translated in the New Testament as jealous and not zealous.

Jealous, that is jealousy, is generally viewed as quite a negative thing. A negative thing. It's envy. Here in verse 19 it is in fact a positive thing.

[ 14 : 07 ] See when you are jealous in a negative sense, you set your love and your attention and your affection intently on yourself.

Which is what jealousy is. Jealousy is just simply setting your love, your attention, your affection intently on something. But when it's negative, you do it to yourself. And therefore you become jealous of people.

Jealousy of anyone who has more talents and more money or more attention or more whatever than I've got, that's when jealousy is negative.

Your zeal is for yourself. If however you become jealous for others, not of others, but for others, then it's positive.

Jealousy for their good, for their growth, for their joy. To be jealous for someone is to set your love and your attention and your affection intently on them in such a way that it overflows in service of them.

[ 15 : 20 ] So this helps us here understand what is happening with Laodicea. A lukewarm Christian is not a hypocritical Christian. This is not about hypocrisy.

These are people who believe what they should believe and do what they should be doing.

However, the supreme passion of their lives, of their hearts, is set on something else apart from Jesus Christ.

There is no jealousy for God. There is no zeal for God. There is no intimacy and passion and joy and wonder in their relationship with God.

And Jesus goes on to express exactly how he feels about that. The first thing he says is in fact quite startling. Have a look at verse 15. I know your deeds that you are neither cold nor hot.

I wish you were either one or the other. hot. He would rather that they be cold or hot, not warm.

[ 16 : 37 ] Now that's a bit strange. You see, you would expect Jesus to say, I wish you were hot. hot. Because that's zeal.

That's passion. That's earnestness. That's keenness in your discipleship. But he also says, I would rather that you would be cold rather than warm.

Didn't expect him to say that. Why would he say that? Because coldness is no belief at all. Why would he say that?

I suppose it was partly the experience of his own ministry.

He often faced the rejection, the expectations, the blindness among the religious people, but openness and reception from the sinners and the outcasts of society.

[17:36] Lukewarm people are often content, unteachable, comfortable, settled with where they are in their relationship with Jesus and Jesus not being the controlling influence of their lives.

Lukewarm people are further from being hot than cold people are. I think that's the point he's making here. When cold people truly get the gospel, they go from cold to hot is what happens. You don't move from coldness to lukewarmness and then to hotness. That's not what happens. You go from cold to hot. That's the step.

Now, the other really negative thing he says is in verse 16. So because you were lukewarm, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.

He's not angry here. He doesn't say because you were lukewarm, my wrath is about to descend on you. He's not saying that. He's not angry. He's sick.

[18:50] That's what it's saying. When Jesus looks at Christians without fervor, without zeal, without earnestness, without joy, without wonder, he wants to be sick.

He doesn't say, I'm angry. He says, you turn my stomach. You make me gag. I want to vomit.

I'm nauseous. In other words, it's personal. Lukewarmness, of course, is a symptom of something that's much deeper. It's a much deeper disease.

And verse 17 reveals the core issue. You say, I am rich. I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing, but you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.

Now, Laodicea, as a city, was known for three things in particular. It was a wealthy banking centre. And this resulted in a fairly self-confident and self-dependent culture.

[19:57] In fact, when the city of Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake in AD 60, they refused the help of the Roman Empire to rebuild it.

Totally unsinkable in its time. Unheard of. Normally, what was required was the centre of Rome to come in and to be your rescuer in a moment of tragedy.

But Laodicea didn't need it. They could save themselves. It was also a famous medical centre. In particular, it was known for an eye ointment that was manufactured there that dealt with eye issues, seeing issues.

Thirdly, it was a fashion centre, especially known for clothing made from locally produced and quite rare and fancy black wool. And so they think they're doing really well here, Laodicea, but with bitter irony, Jesus says, you are in fact poor, you're blind, you're naked.

Spiritual nakedness is a metaphor for guilt and shame in the Bible. You're a sinner. There is a record against you and you're liable for punishment. Spiritual poverty is impotence.

[21:16] You can't change your condition. You can't deal with your guilt and make yourself the person that you ought to be. Spiritual blindness is where you don't even know that you have a problem with your spiritual condition, which is why Jesus says, I'd rather you be cold and hot, not lukewarm, because you're blind.

You can't even see it. Despite the wealth and the health of Laodicea, the city was spiritually poor, sick and naked.

The church was. It seems that Jesus is making a direct link here from the wealth, the wealth of the city, their self-confidence and their lukewarmness.

He seems to be making a direct link here between being wealthy, being brilliant, being accomplished, being a high achiever to spiritual lukewarmness.

It's because the more one is a more self-dependent one is, the less one heart is gripped by the truth that they are in fact a sinner saved by grace.

[22:30] You see, it's something that we might know in our heads. I'm a sinner saved by grace, but the heart has not been captured by it. The knowledge that Jesus loves you as a sinner is not a miracle.

It doesn't move you to tears when you think about it or sing about it. There is a difference between saying I'm a sinner and feeling that I'm a sinner.

When you don't feel that you're a sinner, then you don't feel that you're a miracle of grace. It's something that doesn't stir the affections that you're a miracle of grace. There is a link between

being affluent, accomplished, brilliance, and lukewarmness.

Ask anyone in ministry, anyone in ministry, and they will tell you the more affluent the area, the more accomplished the area, the tougher gospel ministry is in that place.

Very hard to grow churches in middle class, upper middle class, higher class societies. Very hard.

[ 23 : 49 ] Now, I'm hoping the longer I've dragged this on, that I don't actually have to draw the specific conclusions here for us.

We are living in Laodicea. We live in Australia, and even more than that, we live in the north shore of Sydney. We need at the very least, brothers and sisters, to be open to this word, at the very least.

A couple of years ago, we preached through the book of Judges, and one of the most memorable but detestable stories, and the passages that I preached on in that time, was Judges 11 and the story of Jephtha, one of the judges of Israel.

He was one of the leaders of Israel, but he sacrificed his daughter in order to make a vow to God.

All the cultures around Israel at that time practiced that behavior.

They practiced human sacrifices in order to get the gods to do things on their behalf. But

Deuteronomy tells us that God, that the God of the Bible detests human sacrifice.

[ 25 : 16 ] And so I remember after preaching that, the struggles that so many of us had with that passage. How in the world could a leader of God's people, a leader in Israel be so influenced by the culture around them that they did what they did and they brought that culture into their faith?

How could that happen? Well then hear this. When Christians come from the poor parts of the world where the church is growing under great hardship and in scarcity, they say the same thing about the churches in the West.

They're often appalled by the lukewarmness. They link it to how safe and affluent that we are. They notice, for instance, how little we pray.

They notice how much of the money that we make we spend on ourselves. They notice how afraid we are to let even our neighbours know that we're Christians. It is hard to hear, but the church in the West, in general, is accommodating of our culture as Jephtha was to his in Judges 11.

We struggle with lukewarmness too. In April 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. was in prison in Birmingham Jail and he wrote a letter to the church leaders of the United States.

[ 26 : 59 ] It was a very long letter. He had time. But let me just quote just a part of it. There was a time when the church was very powerful. In the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed.

In those days, the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and the principles of popular opinion. It was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.

Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were God intoxicated. By their effort and example, they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is weak. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as the irrelevant social club with no meaning for the 20th century.

That's prophecy in 1963. There is a lukewarmness that comes from a self-sufficiency where the beauty of the gospel hasn't captured the heart and the affections.

[ 28 : 31 ] So how to receive a positive assessment from Jesus? The good news is that Jesus actually does have a solution for us here. This is how we can turn around and receive a positive assessment.

Verse 18, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire so that you can become rich and white clothes to wear so that you can cover your shameful nakedness and salve to put on your eyes so that you can see.

the first solution, and notice the three things there where they thought they were strong. No, no, you've got to come to me and you've got to receive these things from me so that you can be strong.

The first solution is a call to get hold of his gracious salvation.

He offers spiritual wealth and spiritual clothing and spiritual sight. When he says buy from me, he means literally get from me this stuff.

We get a right robe from him. It's an acceptable life, a life that's been cleansed by all sin, by Jesus' death on the cross.

[ 29 : 34 ] It's forgiveness and pardon. All of us don't have to dig too deep at all in our hearts. Just a moment of quietness and we discover that we are not what we ought to be or even what we would hope to be.

All of us are trying to accomplish things in order to cover our nakedness. Jesus calls us to look away from those things, to look to him, to his grace, his mercy, his acceptance.

It's the only garment in life, the only garment in life that will never be taken from you. If you want to get this from Jesus, he offers it to us.

If you want to get this from Jesus, you should pray a prayer, something like this. Lord, my beliefs are incomplete and want just full of selfishness.

My affection is cold. My repentance is half-hearted. My best efforts compared to your holy standards are just unacceptable. But Jesus Christ died the death that I owed and he lived the life that I should live.

[ 30 : 45 ] Welcome me, God, and love me, God, for his sake. Receive his grace. The second way to move from lukewarmness to passion and zeal and joy is through suffering.

It's the gold, the wealth refined by fire. The gold he gives us is refined by fire. And a little later, he says that he loves those he loves, he rebukes any disciplines.

To move into a grace-transformed life, we are going to have to walk with Jesus through a bunch of difficult times.

It's a simple fact that those who live charmed lives are nearly always lukewarm. the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon once said, the greatest gift that God can give any person is their health. Except for a good dose of sickness. In other words, it just breaks you a bit.

[ 32 : 08 ] Just makes you reveal, understand your dependence upon God a bit. Breaks the self-sufficiency and the self-confidence a bit. And that's far greater than more health.

Thirdly, we have to be open to his love. This is one of the most amazing things about this passage in Laodicea, as it is with all the six churches.

Lukewarmness here might make him want to vomit us out, but it does not change his loving purposes for us. That is, Jesus is not into cancel culture.

He doesn't wipe us when we fail him. That's works theology. He does not wipe us when we fail him. We might make him nauseous, but he is totally committed to us.

That is his grace and his mercy to us. So we need to be open to his love again and again and again. And lastly, he wants to commune with us. Verse 20, here I am.

[ 33 : 15 ] I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person and they with me. Throughout the decades and decades and decades, this verse has been used of evangelists to get people to be open to the salvation that Jesus offers.

That's not what it's about. Use it if you want. It's not like your heresy if you're doing that. But the point here is this is about Christian people being open to Jesus coming and communing with them. To be invited into someone's home in ancient times when this was written was to invite them into intimate fellowship and friendship. He wants to commune with you in intimate fellowship and friendship.

He is alive. He's not just a list of ideas and concepts. He wants to commune with you.

For instance, when you pray, is it just a list of things that you want to get from him? Issues that you want him to solve? Or do you want to know him?

[ 34 : 31 ] He desires for us to be open to him and to be intimate fellowship. Start your prayers with Jesus. I want to know you more. I want to know you.

And in knowing you, know myself. Know who it is who's knocking at the door. He's the cosmic king Jesus.

And he wants to know you. Dwell with you. Be intimate with you. And even if the whole church, if you're sitting there and you might be engaging with this and you're at a church that is just full of lukewarm people, even if the whole church at Laodicea does not respond, he's calling me and you as individuals to commune with him.

He says, if anyone, anyone opens a door, I will come. It's a personal call, not just the church at Laodicea, but a personal call for you as an individual.

Open the door to Jesus and commune with him. These messages to the seven churches about you and me and what Jesus thinks about our spiritual health too, not just an assessment of the corporate church.

[ 35 : 53 ] Lastly, the hope of a positive assessment. All servant churches receive a promise. It's a reward for overcoming and the one here is remarkable in verse 21. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne just as I was victorious and sat down with my father on his throne.

What a promise. This is the cosmic king Jesus ruling the universe because he earned the right to rule. First, as the creator of the universe, secondly, is the redeemer of the universe. He has the right to rule. Why would he invite us to rule with him? Because he earned it for us as well.

Do you know why we can get that white robe? because he was stripped naked and laid on a cross. Do you know why we could have spiritual wealth and inherit the earth?

Because he was impoverished, came down from the heights of glory and entered the world as a baby and died the death of a criminal on a cross. He was impoverished.

[ 37 : 16 ] Do you know why that we can get spiritual sights and no truth? Because he allowed them to put a blindfold on him and strike him and mock him.

Prophecy who did that to you. Why? Because he was jealous for you.

He was jealous for me. He was jealous for us, his church. He said his love intensely on us. He exploded with service on our behalf.

His passion changed the world. Everything he does is for us. Every bit of glory and honour he achieved he achieved that he might share it with us.

How can we come to grips with someone who gives themselves utterly for us unless we give ourselves utterly to him.

[ 38 : 38 ] thank humans and to teach who in someone who will issue for them on is the Vai yht allied in the Either Vai catch someone Someone can pop an bee Going