

# Letters to Seven City Churches: Letter to a Lukewarm Church

Revelation 3:14-22

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on June 22, 2014

## Introduction

- ❖ Over the past couple of months, we've been in the book of Revelation. We've been in a series called *Letters to Seven City Churches*, where we're studying Revelation 1-3 and paying particular attention to the messages that Jesus delivers to seven ancient city churches.
  - This is all part of this year's ministry focus on becoming a church that is *For the City*. We want to shift our mentality and eventually our practices, so that we no longer act like a commuter church but a community church – a church that intentionally engages its actual neighbors, for the sake of the gospel, of our mission.
  
- ❖ Now considering our urban context, we would rightly be described as a city church. So as we've been looking at these seven ancient city churches, it's been great to see the parallels to our modern situation and struggles. We see that these ancient churches were under the weight of *external pressures* to conform to the standards of the world – to celebrate what the world celebrates, to think and to act as the world thinks and acts, to simply conform. And at the same time, they were facing *internal pressures* to make the necessary compromises in belief and practice in order to relieve that external pressure. It's a two-front battle.
  - We know exactly how that feels. **With every successive generation, Christ-confessing, truth-minded churches are becoming increasingly out of step with the prevailing culture.** Especially churches in the city. Under Scripture's authority, we hold certain theological convictions and moral positions that are considered irrational or outright offensive to urban city-dwellers. Maybe out in the suburbs you can find conservative pockets where these ideas are readily accepted, but here in the city, those who hold to traditional beliefs and practices will find themselves increasingly alienated from the culture-at-large. **And for that reason, there will always be voices from within calling the church to tweak, to modify, to reinterpret what we believe, what we condone, what we celebrate in order to maintain our relevancy and credibility to the culture.**
  
- ❖ Like I said, the parallels are striking. And as a church in the city of Houston, we're going to see that we share a lot in common with this ancient city church. For example, **Laodicea was a city known for its medical center.** *Sound familiar?* There was a famous medical school that specialized in ophthalmology. They had developed a particular salve (ointment) used for treating eye diseases. It was called "Phrygian powder", named after their region, Phrygia.
  - That helps us understand the full import of Jesus statement in v18 where he counsels the church to buy from him, "*salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.*" In other words, you think you have healthy eyes. You think you have everything you need to fix yourself. But you don't. Jesus says, "You need *my* medicine. You need me."
  
- ❖ Notice this is the only letter of the seven where Jesus has nothing good to say about the church. There's no commendation here. Only criticism. They're sick, and what's worse is that they're sick and don't know it. **They're sick and they think they're fine. That's the worst possible condition to be in next to actually being dead.**

- ❖ But they're not dead and for that reason we still have hope for them. We still have hope for any church that finds itself in similar condition. So we'll look at what Jesus has to say about their spiritual condition and what remedies he provides. First, we'll consider **the surface symptoms**, the signs of a problem. Second, we'll diagnosis **the underlying sickness**. And third, we'll look at **Jesus' prescribed treatment**.
  - Now anytime we take a diagnostic approach like this to a passage, it's always appropriate to apply the diagnostic questions to ourselves. As I get a better feel for the problems facing the Laodiceans, the real question is: *Are these problems reflected in my own life, in my own church?* As I gain a better understanding of this medicine that Jesus offers to this church, the real question is: *Do I need to take it myself?*

### The Surface Symptom

- ❖ Let's start with the surface symptom. How do we know something is wrong with this church? Because of what Jesus detects in vv15-16. <sup>15</sup>*'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!'* <sup>16</sup>*So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.'*
  - How do we know something's wrong? Because Jesus takes one look at this church and its works – he takes one sip, if you will – and he spits it out. It's lukewarm!
- ❖ ***Is there anything worse than lukewarm water especially when you're dying of thirst?*** If I just finish a run or play a game of basketball, the last thing I want to put down is a tall glass of anything lukewarm. I want something ice-cold. Now I know, in the same situation, some would actually prefer something nice and hot. When I was in China, I remember playing ball with some new friends, and during a water break they handed me a thermos. It was steaming! They tried to convince me that drinking hot water was actually better at cooling you down.
  - That's still not what I would reach for given a choice, but for some people, in some cultures, hot water is considered refreshing. I get it. But nobody, in no culture that I'm aware of, prefers to drink lukewarm, tepid water when you're hot and sweaty.
- ❖ But that's the metaphor Jesus is using to describe the Laodicean believers and their works. Their works are neither cold nor hot. They're lukewarm. That's their problem.
  - They're not being criticized for embracing bad theology like some of their sister churches. **They've got the theology; it's that they lack the zeal. They have right beliefs but lack deep conviction.** They know the gospel but they don't love the gospel. There's no passion, no fervor, no fire in their bones.
    - They're spiritually apathetic. That's why Jesus says in v19 to *"be zealous"*.
- ❖ ***Do you know what a zealous Christian looks like? A zealous Christian is a singleminded Christian.*** When you boil it down, this person is about one thing. A zealous Christian doesn't care if he's rich or poor, healthy or sick, praised or insulted, dead or alive. "Just give me Jesus. Jesus is what I need. Jesus is what matters." That's what a zealous Christian says.

- ❖ Now notice I didn't say Jesus is the *only* thing that matters. **A zealous Christian won't say nothing else in life matters. He'll say that Jesus is what ultimately matters.** He's not the *only* thing but he certainly is the *first* thing. He's the main thing.
  - This is the difference between a zealous Christian and a fanatical Christian. I think many people read “be zealous” and they interpret that to mean “be fanatical”. But Jesus is not telling us to be fanatics.
  
- ❖ **Fanatics are fixated on one and only one thing. It's like they have blinders on. They can only see one thing.** Nothing else is in their vision so nothing else matters. It could be a sport, a game, a hobby, a cause, a religion. Whatever it is, a fanatic will so fixate on that one thing that he'll tend to neglect his responsibilities and mistreat his relationships because all he can see is that one thing.
  - **Jesus doesn't want fanatical disciples. He wants zealous ones.** Those who can see all things, who respect their duties, who honor their commitments, who value their relationships, yet who, in the end, place him above all. He wants Christians who are faithful spouses, good parents, loyal friends, responsible stewards, dutiful workers. **But when push comes to shove and allegiance to Christ is on the line, God wants disciples who can “let goods and kindred go / this mortal life also” in order to zealously follow their Lord and Savior even to the gates of hell.**
  
- ❖ Jesus wants his church to be zealous. So when he calls Laodicea lukewarm, he's saying they're the opposite of zealous. They're apathetic. They're halfhearted in their devotion to him. They were giving Jesus half of their heart. The other half is devoted to someone or something else.
  - Now they would never deny or disregard Jesus. **They'll give Jesus devotion. But it's bare minimum devotion.** You want me to go to church? Check. You want me to read my Bible? Check. You want me to tithe? Check. I'll do whatever you require of me, Jesus – but no more, no less. That's typical of lukewarm, halfhearted Christianity.
  
- ❖ Jesus says, “I find that disgusting. I wish you were either hot or cold – just *not* lukewarm.” **Now many people have mistakenly interpreted that to mean that he prefers even spiritual coldness over spiritual lukewarmness.** As if he were saying, “It would be better if you were an ice-cold pagan than to be a lukewarm Christian.”
  - But it doesn't make sense for Jesus to speak approvingly of being an unbeliever who wants nothing to do with him. It actually makes more sense when you realize that he's drawing an analogy to the city's well-documented trouble with their water supply.
  
- ❖ This is where a bit of historical context makes a difference. Laodicea was strategically located on the main trade route through Asia Minor. It was part of a tri-city region including the cities of Hierapolis and Colosse.
  - So Laodicea was well-situated for commerce and trade, but it lacked a natural water supply. Hierapolis to the north was famous for their hot springs believed to have medicinal properties. Colosse to the east was known for fresh, cold drinking water.

- ❖ Laodicea's only option was to pipe in their water from distant hot springs. The problem is that the water never had enough time to cool down before arriving into the city, and when coupled with the high limestone content in the stone pipes, Laodicea was stuck with lukewarm water that had a chalky, nauseous taste.
- ❖ So Jesus is not favoring spiritual coldness over spiritual lukewarmness. **His point is he finds lukewarm devotion disgusting because it's useless. It doesn't do anyone any good.** He wishes their works were either hot with healing qualities or cold with the ability to cool and refresh. But they're neither. Jesus is basically saying, "Stop fooling yourselves. Don't you realize that you make me sick? You can give me your devotion. But if it's apathetic, if it's halfhearted and lukewarm, I just want to spit it out of my mouth." That's pretty harsh.
- ❖ Friends, it's time we ask the hard questions. *How would Jesus describe your devotion to him? Would he call it singleminded and wholehearted? Would he use the word zealous? Or would he call it halfhearted, lukewarm, tepid? Would he likewise call you out for spiritual apathy?*
  - Let the Doctor do his work. Let him examine your heart, and listen to his diagnosis. In v14, Jesus introduces himself as "*the Amen, the faithful and true witness*". We usually treat "Amen" like a period at the end of a sentence. It's how you end a prayer. But in Hebrew it means "truly". When you say "Amen", you're saying that something is trustworthy and true.
    - So by describing himself as *the Amen*, Jesus is saying that he's the Trustworthy One, the True One. His witness (diagnosis) is faithful and true.

### The Underlying Sickness

- ❖ That leads us to our second point – the underlying sickness. Spiritual apathy is the surface-level symptom but the underlying sickness is identified in v17. Let's read it again, "*For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*"
  - So apparently the members of the church were affluent. Because the city itself was affluent. As I said before, Laodicea was strategically located on a major trade route. It became well-known as a **banking and financial center**. The city was also known for its textile trade, especially for a particular **glossy black wool** that was considered highly fashionable. And as we said earlier, the city had a well-known **medical school** and industry. All of this contributed to the city's wealth and prosperity.
- ❖ There's an anecdotal story of how back in 60AD, the city was virtually destroyed by a major earthquake, but Laodicea was able to rebuild itself without a drop of federal aid. Rome offered financial help, but the Laodiceans said, "No thanks, we don't need it." A bunch of wealthy citizens just stepped up and took care of it.
  - So there was a certain pride in being a Laodicean. **There was a certain ethos in the city – a spirit of self-sufficiency.** A Laodicean doesn't ask for help. A Laodicean takes care of the problem him/herself. A Laodicean is self-reliant, self-sufficient.

- ❖ **Well it appears that the church of Laodicea was drinking the city's water, figuratively speaking.** They were drinking deeply of the city's ethos, of their self-sufficient spirit. That's why we see them saying in v17, "We're well-off. We've prospered. We've got money, clothes, and medicine. We have everything we need. We need nothing."
  - **That's the Laodicean spirit. And if I didn't know better, it sounds like we're describing the American spirit.** Our national ethos, our can-do, reach-for-your-dreams national attitude, which has sadly carried over into American Christianity. American churches have drunk deeply of this water. So much so that you can quote to an average congregation, "God helps those who help themselves", and they'll flip open their bibles and ask you what's the chapter and verse.
    - **We are a self-sufficient people. Self-reliance is considered a virtue. And of course that's possible because we are an affluent people.** Especially us Houstonians. Houston avoided the worst of the Great Recession. Our local economy is strong. And we, as a church, are largely comprised of university-educated, white-collared professionals. We're rich! We've prospered!
  
- ❖ Now we're smart enough to know that you should never say to God, "I need nothing." You can't say that. Of course we need something from him. We need forgiveness of sin. We need eternal life. **We need God. Yet at the same time, among affluent congregations (like ours), there's an attitude of spiritual self-sufficiency that we love to drink down.**
  - We tell ourselves, "God doesn't want freeloaders. He helps those who help themselves." So we do all that we can to take care of ourselves, to provide for our families, to carve out a prosperous future. And then everything we can't do, we can't figure out or work out, we leave that up to God. So we still need him – to a degree.
  
- ❖ **Do you see how this kind of spiritual self-sufficiency can be the underlying cause to spiritual apathy?** If you have this self-sufficient attitude in your discipleship to Christ and if you're fairly well-off and don't have many trials – if you can pretty much handle whatever life is throwing at you – then it's no surprise if you happen to be lukewarm in your faith.
  - It's no surprise if you're halfhearted towards Christ – if you feel like you really only need him for the big stuff, for the future stuff, life-after-death stuff. **But when it comes to stuff that happens in this life, if you feel like you can pretty much take care of yourself, then you can pretty much expect a lukewarm faith.**
  
- ❖ Jesus speaks to that and gives the real diagnosis, the faithful and true one. To the Laodiceans – or really to any self-sufficient congregation – he says, "Don't be fooled. Your physical health and material wealth are no sure indicators of possessing spiritual health and spiritual riches. **You think you can take care of yourself. You think you need nothing. But in reality "you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."**
  
- ❖ Now wretched and pitiable are general descriptions of their spiritual state. But notice how the last three words are directed at the three things the city and its citizens were proudest of.

- Jesus is saying, “Yes, you’re materially rich but you’re **spiritually bankrupt**. Yes, you’ve got the best medical school and the best medicine for the eyes but you’re **spiritually blind**. Okay, your glossy black wool is trending and your people are the best dressed but you’re **spiritually naked**. You’re well-off but you are not well.”
- ❖ Those are harsh words. *Couldn't he have said that with a little more tact?* But I think you doctors out there can understand why Jesus speaks the way he does, why he doesn't pull any punches. **When you have patients who are apathetic, who are complacent, who approach their treatment halfheartedly, sometimes you have to call them out.** You shouldn't sugarcoat things. The only way to get through to them is to be blunt.
  - But notice what Jesus says in v19. He says he reproves and disciplines those whom he loves. So it's because he loves the Laodicean church, because he loves this church, that Jesus speaks the way he does. **Knowing that these words are coming from a heart of love gives us even more reason to take his counsel to heart.** To really listen to his diagnosis and to take his prescribed treatment seriously (zealously).

### The Prescribed Treatment

- ❖ That leads to our final point – the prescribed treatment for spiritual self-sufficiency and for its symptom, spiritual apathy. Jesus offers his physician's counsel starting in v18. Now he gives his prescription by means of two illustrations that both communicate the same thing – that, in the end, the treatment is *more of Jesus*.
  - Think about it. **The reason you're lukewarm in devotion to Christ is because, to one degree or another, you've been excluding him, leaving him out.** You've been carrying on your everyday life without relying on Jesus in regular fashion.
    - The treatment is simple but so hard to do. **It's repenting of your self-reliance and returning to Jesus to rely on him once again.** That's the treatment for lukewarmness in your faith. The three Rs: repent, return, rely.
- ❖ The first illustration comes from the world of commerce since it was so important to the Laodiceans. In vv18-19 he pictures them poor, blind, and naked, and in the market for true gold, true garments, true medicine. Jesus' point is that you have to "buy" them "from me".
  - Read it again, *<sup>18</sup>I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. <sup>19</sup>Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.*
- ❖ Now Jesus is counseling them to “buy” these things from him, but obviously he knows they don't have the resources. He just described them as poor, blind, and naked. **So obviously these are goods that can only be purchased by his grace alone. You "buy" them from Jesus without money and without price.**
  - It's the same idea as what you find in **Isaiah 55:1** where God says, *“Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”*

- ❖ Jesus has true riches that rust cannot destroy, that thieves cannot break in and steal. He has white garments that moths cannot ruin, that truly cover your nakedness, your shame. He has the salve that can heal your spiritual blindness and truly help you see.
  - The problem behind your lukewarm faith is that you've basically been ignoring Jesus. **You've been shopping here and there and everywhere, but you haven't been buying from Jesus.** That's what you need to *repent* of. Turn away from that kind of self-reliance and *return* to Jesus and *rely* on him once more.
  
- ❖ The good news of Christianity is that, everything you're trying to buy from the world, Jesus offers you even better and without price. His goods have already been purchased by blood. The price was paid through his death on the cross. And now you can receive these things freely by grace through faith.
  - **Now if you're relying on Jesus, if you're regularly experiencing his grace in the gospel, there's no way you can stay lukewarm.** Lukewarm is not even an option.
  
- ❖ There's this great C.S. Lewis quote where he says, "*Jesus Christ produced mainly three effects – hatred, terror, adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.*"<sup>1</sup> Nobody has a true encounter with Jesus and says, "Meh, that was nice." Jesus has this tendency of eliciting strong emotions out of people. Either you hate him like the Pharisees, or you're terrified of him like the evil spirits, or you adore him like the crowds and the disciples. No one stays lukewarm expressing mild approval.
  
- ❖ Now there's a second illustration starting in v20 that is probably the most famous of images in the book of Revelation. It's a picture of Jesus knocking on a door waiting for you to open. "*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.*"
  - You often hear this verse being used as part of an evangelistic call to non-Christians. We say that Jesus is knocking on the door of your heart. *Won't you let him in?*
    - But don't forget the context. Jesus is speaking to one of his churches – a people who profess Jesus to be their Lord and King. **So don't picture him as some weary traveler knocking door-to-door hoping someone will finally open up and give him something to eat.**
  
- ❖ No, that's the wrong image. **Picture instead a master who went on a journey to attend a wedding feast.** Jesus tells this parable in Luke 12. He says to his disciples, "*Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.*" (Lk. 12:35-37)

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, "What Are We To Make of Jesus Christ?", *God in the Dock*, pg. 158.

- ❖ *Isn't that what Jesus is saying to the Laodiceans in v20? He's their master who has returned to his rightful home. He's not wondering if anyone is going to invite him in. This is his house! **He's just wondering if his servants are alert and ready to receive him or if they're unprepared, apathetic, lukewarm, halfhearted in their devotion to him.***
  - But to those who hear their master's voice, who *repent* of lukewarmness, who *return* to their posts to wholeheartedly serve him, who *rely* on him – to such servants who open the door, Jesus the Servant King promises to dress himself for service. Then he'll invite his wholehearted servants to recline at his table and he'll spend the rest of the evening serving them a banquet dinner. This is the gracious kind of King who's knocking at the door.
  
- ❖ As we conclude, I want you to picture a door with yourself standing in front of it and with your hand on the door handle. You hear a voice calling. You hear knuckles knocking. And you know in your heart that it's Jesus the Servant King.
  - **Now perhaps you've never turned that handle before.** You've never opened that door. But now you're coming to realize for the first time that – despite your affluence – you're actually spiritually bankrupt, that your nakedness (your shame) is exposed before God, that you're actually blind to spiritual realities. Open the door. Let him in.
  
- ❖ **Perhaps you opened that door years ago but for some reason it has slowly shut.** It wasn't your intention, but the fact is you've excluded Jesus from your life. You've left him on the outside. That's why everything feels stale and lifeless. That's why you feel so apathetic. Welcome him back in. Turn that handle again. He'll come in again.
  - **Or perhaps you've already let him into the living room but you've closed certain doors in your house, doors to rooms you'd rather Jesus stay out of.** But he stands and knocks at each one. He won't stop until he has access to every single square inch of the place. Open those doors. Let him in. He won't come in to condemn you but to commune with you. To serve you. To eat with you and you with him.