

Avoid Being Lukewarm

Revelation 3:14-22

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Many years ago, we took care of a ten-year-old boy named Kyle for a few hours while his mom had an appointment. We felt especially close to him and his brother after I did the funeral for their father, who died while saving his two sons from drowning.

Somehow, during dinner that night we got on the topic of vomiting. Since I'm still a little boy at heart, I challenged Kyle to think of synonyms for vomit. We went back and forth with terms like *barf*, *hurl*, *throw up*, *retch*, *blowing chow*, *heave*, *upchuck*, *regurgitate*, *puke*, and *tossing your cookies*. We were laughing so hard tears were running down our cheeks. Our daughters found it funny as well. I'm not sure Beth appreciated it.

When Kyle's mom came to pick him up, she wanted to know if he had behaved. I was still laughing and said something about how funny he was. That alarmed her so she asked him what he had done. He smiled impishly and said, "*We were just thinking of all the words we could for 'vomit.'*"

I reached out to Kyle this week and asked him what he remembered about what happened next: "*I can't remember what all we came up with at dinner, but I can just about recite verbatim what my mom had to say, 'Kyle Thomas Walker, I am so embarrassed! I can't believe you would talk that way at a PASTOR'S HOUSE.'*" My response of, "*'But mom, he started it! I was just playing along!'*" was met with a swift, "*HE HAS FOUR DAUGHTERS, HE WOULD NEVER START A CONVERSATION LIKE THAT!*"

I tried my best to take all the blame, but she wasn't having it because she was sure a pastor wouldn't talk like that. I remember my daughters throwing me under the bus, but she still refused to believe I had started it.

Kyle sent me a follow-up text a few minutes later: "*I remember the next Sunday at church she grabbed me by the collar and marched me over to you to apologize again!*"

Maybe you're also wondering why a pastor would talk like this. I'm aware it doesn't seem appropriate for a dinner table conversation, or in a sermon at church,

right? But Jesus used even stronger language when speaking to a church in Revelation 3:16: **“So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”** The word for **“spit”** literally means *“to vomit, to expel, or to spue.”*

As funny as I found our conversation that night, this is not funny at all. Jesus is saying that half-hearted, indifferent, lukewarm faith makes Him sick to the stomach. He used these stark words not to push people away, but to wake them up and call them back into a vibrant relationship.

Lukewarm believers are nauseating to Jesus.

The letter to this seventh church in Revelation 3:14 begins like the other six: **“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write...”** As we’ve established previously, the **“angel”** is either an actual angel assigned to the church, or it’s a reference to the pastor of the church. The church in Laodicea did not receive any praise or props from Christ. Instead of commendation, they were severely corrected.

There are some distinguishing traits of the city of Laodicea that will help us understand, interpret, and apply this passage.

- Laodicea was an important and wealthy city, known as a center of finance.
- It was also famous for its fashion, especially soft, black wool which was produced as a luxury item.
- There was a large medical school in Laodicea which was known for its discovery of eye ointment for vision problems.
- Laodicea was wealthy, sophisticated, and self-sufficient, but it couldn’t supply its own water. To solve the problem, they engineered an impressive aqueduct system, channeling water from Hierapolis in the north. This city was known for its hot mineral springs, useful for healing and therapeutic baths. To the east, Colossae had cold, refreshing mountain water, which was life-giving, especially in a hot climate. By the time the hot water traveled six miles, it had cooled down. And when the cold water traveled ten miles from Colossae, it had warmed up. Add to that the mineral deposits collected along the way, and what arrived in Laodicea was tepid, stale, and often nauseating.
- When a devastating earthquake occurred in A.D. 60, Laodicea refused any help from Rome, choosing to rely on their own resources.

- The church in Laodicea was initially mentioned in a favorable light in Colossians 4:15-16: ***“Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house. And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.”*** Something happened to turn a vibrant church into something that made Jesus want to vomit.

1. The character of Christ. Listen to how Jesus describes Himself in the second half of verse 14: ***“The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.”*** This is the only place where **“Amen”** is used as a title. It means, *“steady and certainly”* and was used in oaths to mean, *“so be it.”* It’s found 25 times in the gospel of John and is translated, *“Truly, truly.”* 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, ***“For all the promises of God find their Yes in Him. That is why through Him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory.”*** In addition, Jesus is ***“faithful and true,”*** meaning He can be counted on. The phrase ***“beginning of God’s creation”*** means He is the ruler or originating source of everything in creation.

2. The condition of the church. In verse 15, we see that Christ knows the spiritual situation of this church: ***“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot.”*** The word **“cold”** has the idea of a breath of fresh air and **“hot”** refers to *“boiling or fervent.”* Like the water in the city, they were spiritually tepid. They were neither refreshing like cold water or healing like hot water.

As usual, Spurgeon offers a gripping description of their condition:

“They were not cold, but they were not hot. They were not infidels, yet they were not earnest believers. They did not oppose the gospel, neither did they defend it...they are not fiery enough to burn the stubble of sin, nor zealous enough to make Satan angry, nor fervent enough to make a living sacrifice of themselves upon the altar of their God...this state of lukewarmness is so congenial with human nature that it is hard to fetch men from it...the world is always at peace with a lukewarm church, and such a church is always pleased with itself.”

Let’s come back to verse 16: ***“So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”*** The word translated **“lukewarm”** means nauseatingly warm. And the word **“spit”** is even stronger than it sounds. It carries the idea of vomiting, of forcefully rejecting something because it makes you sick.

In fact, we get our English word *emetic*. An emetic is often a medicine or a chemical that induces vomiting, used primarily to expel toxins or poisonous substances from the stomach.

By the time the water arrived through the aqueducts, it was thick with mineral deposits, discolored, and often smelled nasty. Chuck Swindoll writes: *“The water was so distasteful that visitors, not prepared for its tepid flavor, would often vomit after drinking it.”* They would take a drink expecting refreshment and instead feel their stomach retch. It wasn’t just disappointing. It was disgusting. People would literally gag. When Jesus says, **“I will spit you out of my mouth,”** He’s describing a visceral reaction: *“Just like your water makes you sick... your spiritual condition makes me sick.”*

The problem with the Laodicean church wasn’t outright rebellion or open hostility. It was complacent, self-satisfied uselessness. They were spiritually neutral, just blending in, making no real impact, offering no refreshment to the weary and no healing to the broken. One commentor writes, *“Deep down, there is no one more miserable than the lukewarm Christian. They have too much of the world to be happy in Jesus, but too much of Jesus to be happy in the world.”*

Verse 17 describes what led to their lukewarmness: **“For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,’ not realizing you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”** They were self-satisfied, content, and complacent because of their prosperity and pride. The phrase **“need nothing”** means to have *“full hands.”* They lacked a sense of spiritual poverty, which is the opposite of Matthew 5:3: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”**

Let’s break these words down a bit more. Note the contrast between **“you say”** with what Jesus says, **“you are.”** The word **“you”** is emphatic.

- **Wretched.** This word means, *“miserable and calloused.”* In the original, it’s personal, *“the wretched one.”*
- **Pitiable.** They think they’re enviable, but Jesus says they are pathetic in the truest sense of the word.
- **Poor.** This refers to extreme poverty, which was a slap at citizens in a city that bragged of its wealth and banking industry.
- **Blind.** In a community known for its ophthalmology school and the treatment of eye problems, they couldn’t see their true condition because they were spiritually blind. Only the great physician had a cure for their blindness.

- **Naked.** In a place known for luxurious black wool garments, they were spiritually exposed and uncovered before God. Nakedness in the ancient world was a sign of judgment and humiliation.

These images and illustrations would have hit the Laodiceans right where they lived, exposing their deception and desperate condition. Someone said it like this: *“They thought they were thriving...Jesus says they were barely surviving. They looked at themselves and saw success. Jesus looked at them and saw a spiritual tragedy. That’s the danger of lukewarmness; it blinds you to your true condition. It’s not just that they were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. It’s that they had no idea they were.”*

Lukewarm believers are nauseating to Jesus.

3. The counsel of Christ. Jesus could have given a command to them but instead we read in verse 18: ***“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.”*** The phrase, ***“buy from me”*** is emphatic. The good news is that we don’t have to pay for it because Jesus has already paid the price for us. I think of the invitation found in Isaiah 55:1: ***“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.”***

One commentator offers this insight: *“The smug satisfaction of the Laodiceans is countered with the advice that they make some purchases in those specific areas in which they are confident that no need exists.”* Do you see how these themes reflecting Laodicea’s three main industries keep coming up?

- **Spiritual riches:** ***“...gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich...”*** Ephesians 3:8 refers to the ***“...unsearchable riches of Christ.”***
- **Spiritual covering:** ***“...white garments so that you may clothe yourselves and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen...”*** The word ***“white”*** means, ***“dazzling and brilliant.”*** While lukewarm faith nauseates Jesus and leads to rejection, being clothed in His righteousness makes us acceptable, passionate, and ready for His presence!
- **Spiritual sight:** ***“...and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.”*** Ephesians 1:18 says, ***“Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.”***

Check out how the commentator J.C. Ryle applied this verse: *“Nothing blinds the eyes of our souls to the beauty of the gospel as the vain, delusional idea, that we are not so ignorant and wicked as some. Happy is that man who has learned to feel that he is wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.”*

The reason Jesus uses such harsh language with the Laodicean church is because He loved them and wanted to be back in relationship with them. We see this in verse 19: ***“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.”*** The word ***“zealous”*** is an imperative and means to be, *“habitually zealous.”* Interestingly, it’s derived from the same word for “hot” and means, *“to boil.”* Repentance can be defined as turning from sin to the Savior, resulting in a change of attitude, affection, and action. This is an urgent appeal from Jesus which literally means, *“to change instantly before it’s too late!”*

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4. The companionship of Christ. Charles Spurgeon writes: *“Laodicea had fallen into a condition which had chased away its Lord.”* Revelation 3:20 is a treasured verse for many because it shows how Christ longs to be in relationship with His people. Let’s remember the context is that Jesus is an outcast in His own church: ***“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.”*** The word ***“behold”*** can be translated as, *“Lo and behold, look, don’t miss this!”* Jesus is drawing attention to the shocking fact that He is on the outside of His own church.

The words ***“stand”*** and ***“knock”*** are in the present tense, meaning this is a continuous action. Jesus is continually standing, constantly knocking, patiently waiting, repeatedly calling for us to open the door. Our job is to hear and heed His voice. Notice He’s not pounding the door down or forcing His way in. He’s simply calling the lukewarm back to a loving relationship with Him.

The word ***“anyone”*** makes this intensely individual. He is speaking to every Christian and to every church, to the saint, and the sinner. Jesus does not need for the whole church to get on fire so that He can come in; He merely needs just one person to hear Him and to open the door. This is like what the lover exclaimed in Song of Solomon 5:2: ***“A sound! My beloved is knocking. Open to me, my sister, my love...”***

While Jesus stands, knocks, and calls, He waits for us to hear and to open the door while He is still there, because at some point, He will stop knocking. This is

described vividly in Song of Solomon 5:6: ***“I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.”*** I think of Matthew 25:10 where Jesus calls Himself the bridegroom who one day will say it’s too late: ***“and the door was shut.”*** Jesus is waiting patiently but He will not wait permanently. So, the question is not whether Jesus is knocking. He is. The question is: *Will you open the door while He is still there?*

My guess is many of you have seen the famous painting by William Holman Hunt illustrating Revelation 3:20 where Jesus says, ***“Behold, I stand at the door and knock.”*** There are two major versions of this (some say there are three). The original was finished in 1853, and the final work was completed about 50 years later. The second version was larger and brighter and was painted when Hunt was elderly and nearly blind.

Hunt said the idea came to him while reflecting on Revelation 3:20 late one night. To make it as real as possible, he built an actual door and studied plants and vines growing around it. Sometimes he painted outside at night by the light of a lantern.

I thought it might be good for us to do some art appreciation by making some observations. This might bring a little class to the sermon to help balance out my vomit introduction! Let’s look at the two paintings on the screen and make a few observations...



Here are some that come to mind.

- The door has no handle on the outside, symbolizing that we must open the door to Christ.
- Weeds and thorns cover the door, suggesting a neglected soul.
- The hinges are rusty, showing the knocking has been ignored a long time.
- The lantern shows that Jesus is the light of the world shining in darkness.
- The crown resembles both royalty and thorns, showing Christ as suffering Savior and sovereign King.
- His garments are priest-like, symbolizing His role as High Priest.
- The barren garden suggests the human soul is designed to bear fruit.
- The trees in the background may be apple trees, which makes us think of the forbidden fruit and how Christ reversed the curse when He was crucified on a tree.
- The bright morning star is casting light in the sky, symbolizing the dawn of a new day (see Revelation 2:28; 22:16).
- The most striking part is not simply that Jesus is knocking. It's that the King of Heaven is still standing there patiently waiting for the door to be opened.

While this is addressed principally to lukewarm Christians, there were certainly non-Christians in the church, just like there may be some here today. The principle is true for the lukewarm and the lost – you must open the door of your life to the Lord before He will come in.

I recorded a very encouraging 4G podcast this week with Edgewood members Michael and Brenda Burns as they talked about how they had drifted away from the Lord before they opened the door to Him. You can find it on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, the Edgewood YouTube channel, and Facebook.

When we open the door, He will come in and have food and fellowship with us. The phrase *“eat with him”* is translated as *“sup with him”* in the KJV and refers to dinner, which was a long leisurely meal designed to celebrate and strengthen family relationships. In the ancient world, sharing a meal wasn't casual; it was relational, intimate, and unhurried. Revelation 19:9 describes a glorious meal to come: *“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”*

Friends, because lukewarm believers are nauseating to Jesus, open the door of your life to Him right now.

5. The conquest of Christ. Amazingly, the same Christ who threatened to spew us out of His mouth now offers a seat with Him on His throne in verse 21: “*The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on His throne.*” 1 Corinthians 6:2 tells us that “*the saints will judge the world.*” Revelation 20:4 says, “*Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed...they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.*”

6. The challenge to the churches. This letter to the lukewarm ends just like the other letters as it calls us to respond in verse 22: “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*” We’re to lean in and listen by hearing and heeding what the Holy Spirit is saying. Vance Havner said it well: “*The big question is not, ‘Is God speaking?’ The really big question is, ‘Are you listening?’*”

This week, I received an insightful text from an Edgewood member about these letters to the seven churches: “*True, they were written to literal churches in John’s lifetime but is it possible they were written to similar churches today experiencing the same commendations and criticisms as those specific churches? Is it possible those same letters could also apply to individual people?*”

As I reflected on that, it struck me that no church should be satisfied with who or where it thinks it is.

To that point, the Bible Knowledge Commentary states: “*The letters to the seven churches are a remarkably complete treatment of problems that face the church today. The recurring dangers of losing their first love (2:4), of suffering (2:10), doctrinal defection (2:14–15), moral departure (2:20), spiritual deadness (3:1–2), not holding fast (3:11), and lukewarmness (3:15–16) are just as prevalent today as they were in first-century churches.*”

To help us personally apply these messages, I’ll put up a helpful summary and ask some questions suggested by Nancy Guthrie in her book called, *Blessed*.

- **Ephesus** — The Loveless Church: *Has there been a time in my life when my love for Christ was greater than it is now?*
- **Smyrna** — The Suffering Church: *What am I willing to suffer for, because that reveals the true object of my affections?*

- **Pergamum** — The Compromising Church: *What might Jesus point to in my life as an area in which compromise threatens my witness for Him and my relationship to Him?*
- **Thyatira** — The Corrupt Church: *Have I been seduced by voices that twist Scripture to justify or minimize sexual sin or idolatry?*
- **Sardis** — The Dead Church: *Do people around me assume that I am more devoted to Jesus than I really am?*
- **Philadelphia** — The Faithful Church: *Am I walking through doors that Jesus has opened for me to share the gospel?*
- **Laodicea** — The Lukewarm Church: *Has material prosperity and comfort kept me from coming to terms with my true spiritual condition?*

Jesus says to you and me: *“I know you. I know the good and the bad. I know what needs to happen in your life. I know what I’m preparing you for, and if you treasure My promises, you will not regret it.”*

I’ve quoted the “Fellowship of the Unashamed” several times, but I kept coming back to it this week as an antidote to lukewarm living. This prayer has inspired many to stand strong in their faith and to live unashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Originally titled, “A Zimbabwean Martyr’s Prayer,” it was found among the papers of a young African pastor who was martyred over 100 years ago.

I’m part of the fellowship of the unashamed. I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I’m a disciple of his. I won’t look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, my future is secure.

I’m finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colorless dreams, tamed visions, mundane talking, cheap living, and dwarfed goals. I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don’t have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean on his presence, walk by patience, lift by prayer, and labor by power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven, my road is narrow, my way rough, my companions few, my guide reliable, my mission clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of

the adversary, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up, let up, until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, and preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must go till he comes, give till I drop, preach till all know, and work till he stops me. And when he comes for his own, he will have no problems recognizing me. My banner will be clear!

Memberships at 9:00

Ron Delp
Karen Delp
Terry Schomer

Memberships at 10:45

Jake Dunn
Tori Drews
Anavah Foss
Gary Ralston

As you leave today, please pick up a packet of Easter invites.