



feeding ... gathering ... carrying ... leading. (Isaiah 40:11)

[Sermon \(MP3\)](#)

August 26, 2014

Dear Church Family,

If you were a part of the Laodicean church, you would have heard what Jesus said to the other churches before it came to your turn. What do you think they were anticipating? Whatever their thoughts, a blind and false sense of confidence, or the beginnings of concern in the light of Christ's judgment of other churches, what they hear had to be worse than even the most concerned would have anticipated. And they hear it knowing that this has already been heard by the other six churches. This was a devastating word for them in terms of their reputation and self-esteem. Imagine how you would feel in their shoes.

Three designations of Christ are featured in the now familiar pattern of these letters, *The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation*. These designations combine to present a Christ who is the absolute truth of God. Christ's view, his assessment of them is the truth and it is the only truth. To call Himself the Amen is for Christ to say that the only legitimate response to what He says is Amen because it is unalterably true. That is because He is the faithful and true witness. There is no other perspective or different way of seeing things when it comes to Christ's perspective. The Laodiceans might like a second opinion, but there is no second opinion if you want the truth of God.

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. What is Jesus wanting to convey here? There is a long and rich history of teaching from this passage that understands that Jesus is talking metaphorically about the temperature of their faith, that it is lukewarm. And so their problem is that they are not sufficiently moved by the gospel, lack a passion and commitment that absolutely should result from a genuine encounter with the gospel. But there is an additional consideration that you will find in a lot of commentaries that links this to a specific aspect of Laodicea, the poor quality of its water. Its location was at the crossroads of two important trade routes. But that location did not have a sufficient natural supply of water to support the size of the city. So they constructed an aqueduct to get water from the nearest supply, the hot springs of neighboring Hierapolis 6 miles to the NE. By the time that water arrived in Laodicea, it was lukewarm. The city of Colossae to the SE had natural cold water springs, but it was further away. Even if they had tried to pipe water in from there, during warm weather, it too

would have arrived lukewarm. If Jesus is referring to the Laodicean water, the emphasis of his message is that the Laodicean works (indeed their very selves) are as distasteful to him as their water is to them and those who visit them. It is a graphic picture of how Jesus feels about them, but not necessarily a diagnosis of a spiritual problem of lukewarmness. This view would be that when we take the language of hot, cold and lukewarm and apply it metaphorically to devotion, we might be taking it further than the text intends.

While there are aspects to this interpretation that I find helpful in making sense of this passage, I am not comfortable with dismissing the validity and value of the lukewarm devotion teaching and understanding with its rich history. But in considering and exploring the connection to the actual water of Laodicea as compared to its neighboring cities, this view does emphasize significant truths that can be muted by a strong focus on the lukewarm devotion of the Laodiceans.

One point of emphasis would be a focus on how Jesus feels about them before we rush too quickly to focus on what is wrong with them. Is the possibility of Jesus feeling this way about a Christian who is not involved in gross, unrepentant sin even allowable to our own theological understanding? For many, it is beyond the realm of possibility that Jesus could feel this way about anyone. Jesus is the one who is always welcoming, always accepting, always affirming. Do we allow these letters to the churches to reveal to us aspects of the character of the risen Christ with whom we have to do? The shocking nature of this harsh picture of disgust and rejection causes us to need to believe that they were really bad, so that we do not have to consider the possibility that Jesus could feel that way about our works. Are you able to read this passage and conclude that you have nothing to worry about? That the Laodicean Christians are clearly different than you? What in the text are you basing that on? There is no identification of heresy, sexual sin or idolatry that we see in other letters. And remember that this a first century church, within a generation of Christ's death. There is no such thing as cultural Christianity. Further, not only do they now have to face that this is how Jesus feels about them, but if their works are truly like their water, there is nothing they can do to improve them. The lukewarm water is the best they can do given their resources. We see that this is an important realization for them to come to.

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Here Jesus clearly identifies something as the reason for his reaction to them. It is their sense of self sufficiency, their strong self-esteem that is disgusting to Him. It is not the fact that they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. That does not evoke disgust or rejection in Jesus because He lives to remedy all that. It is their wrong sense of being rich and lacking nothing that he finds so objectionable.

His counsel in verse 18 first needs to be understood as a further indictment on their own sense of wellbeing and status. The three things he counsels them to buy, gold refined by fire, white garments and eye salve reference aspects of Laodicea that they took pride in. The city was extremely wealthy, famous for its garments made out of the wool in the region (which was a glossy black), and known as a medical center which featured an eye salve. Jesus is in effect saying that even where you would look to bolster your own reputation in the eyes of others and your own self-esteem, you are needy. So in regard to their reputation and their self-esteem, this word from Jesus is their worst nightmare. But with regard to their relationship with Christ, there is a huge hope in v. 18 because he is offering to help them.

But why does he use the language of buying from Him? How are they to buy anything when they are so impoverished? This passage is full of paradox, of things not being what they seem, of reversals of what we would normally expect. The first of these for the Laodiceans is their own sense of wellbeing; their self-esteem is completely turned upside down. Here is another. How can you say to people who you have just identified as completely impoverished to buy something from you? A dictionary definition of buy is, “obtain in exchange for payment”. What can they bring to this exchange?

From this passage, we realize that the only thing they can bring is their need. And with this language of buying, Jesus highlights that need is actually the coinage of exchange with Him. It is those who are aware of their great need for Jesus who have the ability to buy from Him. And the opposite is also true. Those who lack that awareness, who do not see themselves as needy, lack the wealth to buy.

And so we are beginning to understand that Jesus’ harshness, his devastating attack on their self-esteem (that so offends our sensibilities in our therapeutic culture), is actually His way of giving them the coinage to buy from Him what they need. Paradoxically, while being stripped of that which acquires status and favor in this world, they are being given that which acquires status and favor in the kingdom of God.

Those whom I love ... Excuse me? What does Jesus love about the Laodiceans? What in them has attracted or gained this love? In their current state they actually repulse Him. They nauseate Him, yet He loves them. This letter to the Laodicean church may be the best representation of how Tim Keller describes what he calls the gospel of justifying faith, “we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope — at the very same time.” As Christians still struggling against our sinful nature, we have parts of ourselves which are nauseating to a holy Jesus Christ, yet that does not separate us from His love. When Jesus says to be zealous and repent, that can be viewed as much as an invitation as a command. It is the opposite of rejection; it is an invitation to get excited about their relationship with Him.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock... This passage is often used in evangelism and it has lost its connection to the Laodicean church which robs it of so much of its power both for the seeker and the Christian. Too often we try to get people to come into relationship with Christ without an awareness of their sin and deep need for Him. And we have lost the application to Christians of this picture of Christ outside the door. Too often we are content to live our lives with Him outside the door, relying on our own resources, not consulting Him throughout our days.

What a reversal at the end of this letter from where it began. “I want to spit you out of my mouth” to “I want to come in and share a meal of intimate fellowship with you.” Jesus then promises to share His throne with those who overcome. The highest honor for overcoming is given to the church that least deserves it.

We have such a difficult time grasping that Jesus loves us in our sinfulness; that He loves us even when He is not pleased with us. But when we grasp that we are loved, especially in our unworthiness, knowing that love has the power to transform our lives. May the Holy Spirit give us ears to hear and eyes to see Christ’s tremendous love.

In Him,
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