

Hear What The Spirit Says Laodicea

This is the final message in this series. Advent begins next Sunday as we begin preparing our hearts to celebrate the birth of the Lord and the meaning and mystery of the incarnation. This morning however, we once again have the responsibility to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church at Carbondale through the messages he sent to the seven churches in Revelation.

Hopefully over these past weeks we've heard the Lord challenge us just as he did the first century church members, to return to our first love, to repent of sin, to wake up from spiritual slumber and strengthen what remains. We've heard his encouragement to not be afraid of persecution or trials but to remain steadfast, to complete the race and hold fast to the faith. We've heard Jesus express his concern about spiritual and moral compromise, immorality and idolatry, false teaching in the church and his concern about a shift in their attitude regarding their dependence on the Holy Spirit. Now we come to this final church.

Laodicea is about forty miles southeast of Philadelphia and almost due east of Ephesus in modern Turkey. (Map). We actually learn a great deal about the city just by reading the words of Jesus in his letter. **“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. 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 am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.” Revelation 3:14-18**

I said we can learn about the city from what Jesus says to the church. Sadly, often the church takes on the attributes and attitudes of the city and culture around it and that appears to have happened here. Laodicea was a wealthy city. It stood at the junction of important trade routes and it had become the banking center of the region. It was prosperous and proud of it. As an example, after the earthquake that destroyed much of the area they refused help from the Emperor. They needed nothing and that attitude bled over into the church. Self-sufficient.

They had powerful banks, amphitheaters for entertainment, gladiator games. They had a fine medical school that specialized in ophthalmology. The city and the school were known for a certain powder used to treat eye disease. Laodicea was also known for a particular breed of

black sheep whose wool was of an extremely fine quality. Consequently, the garments made of Laodicean wool were highly sought after.

One thing the city didn't have was its' own water supply! To the north of the city, about five miles away was the city of Hierapolis. It had hot springs that still today attract tourists. Aqueducts were built to carry the water to Laodicea, but by the time the water traveled the four or five miles it had become lukewarm and also laced with sediments and minerals that made it unsuitable to drink. It was great for medicinal purposes, but not so much for drinking.

To the south-east of Laodicea was the town of Colosse. They had a great water supply that came from the nearby snow-capped mountain. It was cold, clear water, but it had to travel several miles to reach Laodicea and by that time and distance, it too had become tepid or lukewarm. Jesus references these natural challenges and strengths of the city as he addresses the church.

As he did last week at Philadelphia, Jesus identifies himself not with a reference to Revelation 1 but in a unique fashion. He is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. Amen means "so be it." Jesus identifies himself as the one who is "so be it," the one who always does what he says, who stays true to his word, the one who has the final word. Amen! He is the faithful and true witness. A true witness is an eye-witness with firsthand knowledge. He is letting the church know he has firsthand, eye-witness knowledge concerning the church. He knows them and sees them so what he is about to say is indisputable.

He also describes himself as the ruler or the beginning of creation. He is describing himself as the source of all creation. What an awe-inspiring claim! Remember, he is speaking to a church that has the attitude they don't need anything. They have all they need, self-sufficient, and Jesus reminds them, "I am the source of all creation! Believe me, you need me!"

Jesus says "I know your deeds." In most of the other churches Jesus has had something affirming or good to say about them after announcing he has seen their deeds. Not this time. Their deeds are tied to the fact they are neither cold nor hot. He tells them he wishes they were one or the other. Either cold or hot, but since they are lukewarm it makes him sick and he is about to spit them out of his mouth. He is saying their lukewarmness is going to make him vomit. It's pretty graphic. So what does he mean? I think there are a couple of ways to look at what Jesus is suggesting to the church.

We talk about someone being “red hot, on fire for God”. We are talking about someone being passionate in their love for the Lord, wholehearted in their devotion. That would be the Lord’s preference. That’s what he expects from his church. Passionate in our deeds of service, passionate in our love for the Lord, our worship, prayer-life, evangelism. We want to be “on fire” for God. The alternative, if someone is cold, it suggests they are indifferent, even antagonistic. Jesus says he would rather you be hot or cold, all in or all out. It makes it sound like he is saying “I’d rather you be a hard-core sinner than a lukewarm saint.” Perhaps there is some truth to that. Outright sinners might in fact be in a better position to hear the voice of the Lord as he speaks truth rather than a lukewarm Christian who thinks he has already heard from God and doesn’t need anything else. The lukewarm Christian may be harder to reach, but I don’t know that the Lord is wishing for all saints or all sinners.

He says “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 I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” He ties his sickened response to their deeds. Lukewarmness means they are useless, but maybe cold is not a problem like we’ve thought. Perhaps hot and cold can both be positive and useful. The hot water served a medicinal purpose, to help aching joints and muscles, the mineral baths helping to heal and restore. The cold water served to quench the thirst of tired travelers, to refresh and restore. Perhaps Jesus is saying “You’ve become useless. You’ve lost passion in your purpose! People walk into your church in pain, suffering, needing the healing waters of salvation and the gospel of grace and all you offer them is tepid platitudes. They come in need of the cold, refreshing, life giving, sweet water of the Holy Spirit’s presence and all you offer them is something lukewarm they end up spitting out of their mouth.” He says, “I know your deeds. You aren’t offering healing, you aren’t offering salvation and comfort, you aren’t offering Me! You’re offering your best efforts, your programs. You have wealth and prestige and you think that’s enough, you think you’re enough and that makes me sick!” The heart of the problem at Laodicea was pride!

“You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you don’t realize you’re wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”

They had the same attitude as their city. “We don’t need a thing.” The spirit of the culture had infected the church! They didn’t feel the pressure of persecution like some of the other churches or the burden of poverty, they were doing fine. They weren’t living the counter-cultural lifestyle of the kingdom, they weren’t rocking the boat so they didn’t feel any pressure from the culture around them. They were full, fine, comfortable, they didn’t need a thing. And with that they became useless. Like the lukewarm water that wasn’t cold enough to drink or hot enough to heal, they had become good for nothing. Lukewarm. Passionless. Worthless. Nauseating. And Jesus says “You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked and you can’t even see it and that makes me sick!”

Jesus perception of this church and their perception of themselves was totally different. Jesus was sickened by the condition of the church, by their lack of passion and devotion, by their refusal to take an honest assessment of their lives. But what do you do with a blind person? Scream at them because of their blindness? “Can’t you see what you are doing?” No, you offer them help, healing. Jesus is sickened by their condition but look what he does – he offers help. “I counsel you to look to me. You aren’t doing as well as you think. Listen to me, listen to my counsel. Stop looking to yourself and look to me. You need what I alone can offer you. You need a devotion, a faith that like gold has been tried by fire and made pure, without compromise or sediment or corruption. You need garments of righteousness, the covering of my grace and not your pathetic works. Your pride leaves you naked. You need the riches of the kingdom, the riches of grace. You need the healing salve of the Holy Spirit, a fresh touch so you can see the truth about yourself and your condition.” To the church at Laodicea and at Carbondale, we need what only Jesus can give us. We need him, his Holy Spirit. His help. We need to look to him! He didn’t tell them to try new efforts, new products, he told them to come to him. “Buy from me” he says. He alone has what we need. We are poor but he has gold. We are naked but he has clothing. We are blind but he has salve to heal our eyes and restore our sight. Everything we need is found in Him!

He explains to them that his reproof, his strong words and discipline are expressions of his love for them. He tells them their actions have made him sick but then he tells them he still loves them and is trying to help them. His prescription for their sickness, their condition is to be earnest and repent. Repent, return and regain their passion. **“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone**

hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.”

Revelation 3:19-20

I'm blown away again by his mercy, his compassion. He just isn't willing to throw us away, not yet. "I haven't given up on you so turn away from this lukewarm, passionless Christianity! Be zealous, be earnest, be fervent in Spirit." The word means to boil over. Get fired up over Jesus and living for him again. Renew your faith, renew your commitment. To the first church at Ephesus remember he told them to repent and return to their first love. To the last church he tells them to repent and return to a place of zeal and passion for Him.

Again and again we've heard Jesus tell his church to repent: turn away, turn around, and get back to Jesus and obedience to him. Get back to the zeal and passion for the Lord you had at first. Repentance is the antidote to pride. Repentance is the solution to compromise and lukewarmness and sin. Repent, recognize what is wrong and reverse course and return to what is right. Repent because look where Jesus is!! He says "Here I am, standing outside at the door, knocking for entrance, trying to get you to hear me and respond."

We often use this passage to show people how they can be saved. Jesus is knocking at the door and waiting for you to open your heart to him. It is certainly the truth, but he is writing this to his church. How messed up is this? Jesus, the Lord of the church is outside trying to get in? What in the world??!! How does Jesus get excommunicated, locked out of his church? Have we become so blind we didn't notice that we pushed HIM out? Did we try so hard to please the world and the culture that we squeezed him out? He was just too radical for us? Did we stop making room for him so he just slipped out the side door and we didn't notice because we thought everything was going along swimmingly? I don't know for sure how he got in that position, but I want him inside, at the head of the church where he is supposed to be, don't you? God help us if Jesus is no longer welcome in the church, no longer fellowshiping with us.

"I stand at the door and knock." How merciful and gracious he is. He is still there. He hasn't given up on his church. If we will open the door, he will come in and eat a meal with us. He isn't talking about a cup of coffee, he is talking about the fellowship of a meal, hours spent at the table together. "I will eat with him and he with me," Jesus said. "I will eat what you set before me but, good news, You can eat with me! I'll supply everything you are lacking. I'll enjoy your bologna sandwich and you can enjoy my 8 oz. filet. I've got better things than you can ever provide if you will repent and open the door and let me in."

Understand, I don't think it is just about a meal. Jesus says to open the door and let him in, but in light of everything else he has said, he is talking about repentance and coming to him and restoring our passion and zeal. He is talking about opening the door and wholeheartedly surrendering our life to him. John Stott writes, **“His entry is an occupation. He comes in to take control. No room may be locked against him. He has conquered us. He is the master of the house. His flag flies from our roof. This is what it means to be committed to Christ and to be wholehearted in our allegiance to him. It is to surrender without conditions to his lordship. It is to seek his will in his word and promptly to obey it. It is not just attending religious services twice a Sunday...It is not just leading a decent life or believing certain articles of the creed. No, it is first to repent, turning decisively from everything we know to be wrong and then to open the door to Jesus Christ, asking him to come in...It is being personally and unconditionally committed to him...Nothing less will do...whether we are hot, cold or tepid depends on whether we have opened the door of our personality to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is only the beginning of the Christian life; but it is an indispensable beginning.”** ... John Stott This is what he wants for us and from us. Nothing less will do.

“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Revelation 3:21

Notice the promise he offers to the overcomer, that they will share in his rule. He says this to the church whose attitude had been nauseating to him, the church to whom he had just said “I am about to spit you out of my mouth,” yet if they will repent and turn to him, he will grant them a place of authority, to rule and reign with him. How incredible is his mercy and grace, that the highest place is within reach of the lowliest if we will turn to him and trust him.

He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying. We aren't immune to that spiritual condition of lukewarmness. We get too comfortable, respectable. He didn't call us to be respectable, he called us to be obedient and faithful. If we are, we will stand against the culture, against the tide. We aren't here to maintain the status quo. We are here to advance the kingdom, to storm the gates of hell. God help us to repent and renew our zeal and passion for Christ. We have to get our eyes healed and make sure Jesus is inside where he belongs, that we are totally and completely dependent upon and surrendered to Jesus.

God deliver us from tepid Christianity. That kind of Christianity is fueled by pride. We need nothing. We are satisfied, but that means we are no longer desperate for Jesus. We are no longer depending completely upon him. Spiritual pride says we need nothing, not revival, not prayer, not discipleship, not fellowship, not the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit, not holiness, not purity, not repentance. Don't be dulled and duped and polluted by pride. Instead, Jesus says, repent and be zealous, be useful, look to me and be the church I've called and commissioned you to be in this generation. Be hot or be cold, but don't settle for lukewarm!

How are we doing? Ask him for salve to put on our eyes so we can see our condition. Where do we need to repent? Where do we need to increase our devotion? Where do we need to enhance our zeal? Have we become tepid, lukewarm? Have we settled for less than Jesus wants for us or has for us? Stir us Lord but don't spit us out. It's time to repent and turn to him!

Has the fire gone out? Stir it up! Lord, open our eyes, heal our eyes and help us to take a good look at where we are, at who we are, and at who you've called us to be. God may be about to give you, to give us, a new assignment. That's all right. Say yes to him. He is knocking at the door. Trust him. Open the door to him and see what he brings into your life! Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church at Carbondale!