



7th Sunday in Epiphany



Message Transcript

How can we ensure our church doesn't serve tepid tea like the one in Laodicea?

So, imagine you're lining up for morning tea after church today. However, when you sit down to drink it ... you discover instead of being piping hot, it's lukewarm! Some people like their tea or coffee iced, others prefer their tea or coffee hot ... but not many enjoy their tea or coffee lukewarm!

It reminds me of a scene from one of my favourite Christian movies, called *War Room*. *War Room* is a movie about the power of prayer. There are two main characters. The first is a real estate agent named Elizabeth. She has been asked to sell the home of an older woman, named Clara. At their first visit, Clara shows Elizabeth her home and then they sit down share a cuppa. Now, Clara is a prayer warrior – no not a worrier – a warrior: a person who enters the spiritual battle on behalf of others in prayer. Anyway, back to the movie. While Clara is in the kitchen making the coffee, she asks Elizabeth about her prayer life. Which, Elizabeth feels is a little too intrusive! Elizabeth tentatively responds, "Well, as far as my faith is concerned, I believe in God, just like most people. He's very important to me." Clara responds, "So, if I asked you what your prayer life was like, would you say that it was hot or cold?"

Elizabeth answers, "I don't know that I would say it's hot. I mean, we're like most people. We have full schedules. We work. But I would consider myself a spiritual person. I'm not hot, but I'm not cold either. Just, you know, somewhere in the middle." When Clara serves Elizabeth her cup of coffee, however, Elizabeth it's only lukewarm. Elizabeth asks, "Ms. Clara, do you like your coffee room temperature?" Clara confidently answers, "No, I like mine hot!" Then she explains, "Elizabeth, people drink their coffee hot or cold, but nobody likes it lukewarm, not even the Lord."

Well, when we come to the letter written to the congregation at Laodicea, Jesus makes known the temperature he prefers very clear – and it isn't lukewarm! Let's start by discovering a little more about Laodicea.

The city was located about 155 kilometres east of Ephesus. It was also pretty close to Colossae and Hierapolis. The city was known throughout the Roman province of Asia for its wealth and its commercial life. As the banking centre of Asia, it was the most prosperous of the seven cities. Many large, beautiful homes were built in this city, the ruins of which are still visible, and probably some of them were owned by Christians. Laodicea also had a flourishing clothing industry. A particular breed of black sheep were raised around this area, and the glossy, black wool was used

to make pricey clothing. So, we'd call it the Merino fashion centre of Asia. The city was also noted for its medical practice, especially for its eye and ear salve. We all know the symbol of a staff with entwined serpents around it. That's the symbol of Aesculapius!

So, Laodicea was kind-of-like the Commonwealth Bank, David Jones and Royal Prince Alfred Hospital all rolled into one. Knowing this helps us understand some of the references we've just heard.

Again, Jesus starts by introducing himself in a very significant way.

"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation." (Revelation 3:14)

Again, the Lord Jesus wanted this church to acknowledge His authority. He was first of all the "Amen." We're all pretty familiar with this word. But, did you know, that Jesus also used this word frequently? Although its somewhat concealed in our English translations, when Jesus said the words, "Truly, truly, I say to you" ... He is actually saying "Amen, Amen, I say to you."

Jesus is telling everyone what He is about to say is extremely important, a 'wake-up-and-listen-to' kind of truth. Notice that Jesus also called Himself, the "firstborn of creation" (see Colossians 1:15 and 1:18b). This church needed to be told 'the important truth, the whole truth, and especially truth' about how to relate to His new creation.

Then Jesus reminds them, He is intimately aware of all that's going on. Then He reveals,

"... 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." (Revelation 3:15-16)

It's fairly graphic, isn't it? Yet Jesus chooses to use very cleverly crafted language that picks up on a unique feature of their city. Now, I visited the ancient city of Laodicea, in 2017, when I did a Greece and Turkey Bible Studies tour. Laodicea had no local water supply. They obtained their water through an aqueduct from the hot springs at Hierapolis, some 14 kilometres away. So, if you were staying in a motel in Laodicea and turned on the tap to make yourself a cold drink you would probably spit it out because it would be lukewarm. I'm sure you too would find it nauseating and repulsive!

So, Jesus is literally saying, "your lack of commitment makes me want to be sick – so sick I feel like vomiting you up." We don't usually imagine Jesus saying something nauseates him, do we? In fact, we might question whether that's what Jesus really meant. However, when we look at the Greek word used, there is no debate – it literally means to 'vomit.' Jesus needs to vomit out this church because it was nauseating to Him.

What created this condition? There is only one answer. It is compromise! Think about it. To make something lukewarm, you mix together hot and cold. We do this by using an air conditioner. When it's winter and our church is icy cold, we grab rugs to keep our legs warm. When it's summer, and we're all hot and stuffy, we open doors, turn on fans – all to keep the temperature at more comfortable level. We humans do not like extremes of temperature. We do not like it to be cold, and we do not like it when it is hot. So what do we do? We mix the two together, until we've made things nice and comfortable.

And that is what was happening in the church at Laodicea. They were compromising spiritually for the sake of comfort. How? They were compromising their teaching for the sake of peace. They had enough truth to sooth and salve the conscience without becoming fanatical radicals; but enough coolness to calm their wills without freezing people out. It was a comfortable church. You could attend the services easily, they'd be very pleasurable, but no spiritual growth was occurring in their spiritual lives. You would not be challenged, or rebuked, or corrected, or



exhorted. You'd only be encouraged and respected because it was a comfortable, yet compromising church.

And what does Jesus think of a church like that? He says, "Its nauseating!" The people may like it, but Jesus does not. But that wasn't Laodicea's only problem. They also had an identity problem.

The Lord continues,

"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." (Revelation 3:17 NIV)

What a sad condition! This Laodicean congregation was — putting it bluntly — smug and over-confident with themselves. They were self-sufficient. They were complacent. They had plenty of money. They thought they were doing well. But when Jesus looked at their community, He saw a 'wretched, pitifully poor, blind and naked group of people.

Why such a discrepancy? Because they were being measured by two different standards. Laodicea was using the standards of the world, while Jesus was using the standard of what He intended His church to be like.

Jesus' church is not to be a Country Club, run for the benefit of the members. Nor is Christ's church a Performing Arts Centre, where one is entertained with wonderful music. While churches may have great community and excellent worship music, none of these qualities represent the purpose of the church.

Jesus tells us His church is to be salt — and not just plain salt, but salty salt! He said if "*salt that loses its saltiness is good for nothing*," (Matthew 5:13, Mark 9:50, Luke 14:34).

The church is to function not only when it meets on Sunday, but out where the people of the church are during the week -- in offices, in the shops, in your neighbourhoods, in clubs, wherever YOU are. That is where the church does its work. That is where it is to tell the good news and to be salty flavouring of the Kingdom of God.

So, what does Jesus tell them to do?

"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 3:18 NIV)

The "gold" represents our faith that is refined in fire (see 1 Peter 1:7). The "white clothes" represents the right-standing with God which is only available through Jesus Christ. (see Luke 14:15-24) And the "eye salve" was specific to the Laodicean culture. They were noted for their eye ointment. But Jesus says they needed spiritual eye salve that will enable them to see and understand the truth of God (see 1 John 2:27).

So, how do we get this "gold, white clothes and eye salve"? Jesus says:

"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 go in and eat with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:19-20)

Our Lord is telling this church, despite its terrible weakness and failure, "I love you, and it is because I love you that I rebuke you and discipline you."

Does that remind you of the way a loving parent treats their children?

Jesus speaks with bluntness because He loves this church, and he offers them a wonderful way out.

Even though this analogy of Jesus knocking on the door of our heart' is often used for unbelievers, Jesus is writing to a community who should have already had Jesus in their heart.

Unfortunately, however, Jesus was shut out from their lives.

If you feel as though Jesus is on the outside knocking on the door of your heart, please come and see me after the service.

Then Jesus gives His final promise:

"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 3:21-22)

There is much I could say about the division between "Jesus' throne" and the "Father's throne". For the sake of time, however, let me summarise. The overcoming Christian is invited to reign with Jesus on His throne (see Matthew 19:28).

Now for the last time in these letters we hear our Lord say, "He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

We are to receive truth from God and share it with the world.

We do not originate truth. We do not think up the things that we would like to believe and spread that around.

We are responsible to hear what the Spirit says to the churches and then live as salty people flavouring the world wherever we go.

Let's pray,

Heavenly Father,

We come before you aware of our need for your grace. In your Word, you warned the church at Laodicea about being lukewarm. We recognize how often we, too, become complacent in our faith. Forgive us, Lord, for the times we have been indifferent, relying on worldly riches and comforts instead of seeking the true riches that come from you.

Jesus, you stand at the door and knock, inviting us into deeper fellowship with you. Help us to open our hearts fully and welcome you in, surrendering our lives to your will. Clothe us with your righteousness so that we may not be spiritually naked. Anoint our eyes with your healing salve so that we may see clearly—seeing ourselves, our world, and your truth as You see them.

Give us a passion that burns for you. Help us to live each day in the light of your truth, growing in faith and love, always ready to listen and obey your voice.

*In Jesus' name, **Amen.***



Going deeper into what Jesus expects of his church ...

Look out for Week 8 of the "Journey through Christ's Letters to His Church" devotional:

This week we look closely at Jesus letter to the church at Laodicea.

1. Has your attitude toward money ever been a hindrance to your spiritual life? Do you ever feel as if you need to "keep up with the Joneses"? What problems does that cause?
2. On a spectrum that runs from cold to hot, where would you place your own spiritual life?
3. God is the Creator (Revelation 3:14). What implications does this have for your sense of obligation to Him?