

Sermon outline and notes:

© Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor Emeritus

Swift Creek Baptist Church.com, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

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Revelation 3:14-22 “The Lukewarm Church”

Intro. Imagine a doctor being lukewarm about disease. You feel sick, so you drag yourself along to his office. He feels your pulse, takes your temperature, and tells you to pay the nurse on the way out. You say, “Well, just a minute, what’s wrong with me, doctor?” He looks up from the papers on his desk and says, “What’s wrong with you? Oh, there’s nothing to worry about. You have a bad case of bubonic plague.” You look at him in astonishment and say, “But aren’t you going to give me an injection or put me in the hospital? People don’t just walk around with bubonic plague, do they? It’s catching, isn’t it? What about my family? What about all those people in your waiting room? What about *me*? People die of bubonic plague, don’t they?” The doctor just looks at you mildly and says, “That’s all right, my friend. You have to die sometime. It might just as well be of bubonic plague as cancer or a coronary. Diseases don’t interest me too much. Now, if you needed surgery, well, that’s more my line.” We can hardly imagine a doctor being lukewarm about disease! Imagine a church being lukewarm about sin and the only way of salvation from hell? Does either make sense?

Such was the case with the church at Laodicea.¹ Of the 7 churches, I suppose that Laodicea was the worst. Unlike the others, Christ doesn’t say *any* good thing about this church. Instead, He rebukes them for being lukewarm. And the tragedy is that the problem at the church at Laodicea is a problem with so many churches in our day. This morning I am going to rebuke this problem for the same reason mentioned in v.19. Because Christ loves us, He rebukes the sins that harm us. And lukewarmness in the church not only harms the church, but it is responsible for countless numbers of people never being touched by the gospel of Christ.

So church, listen to this message like you have never listened before. If we will examine ourselves and heed this message from Christ, our church will never be the same. Now as we look together at this letter, let’s see first of all:

I. THE CORRESPONDENT OF THIS LETTER

Back in chapter 2, v.1 Jesus identified himself as He who “walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands,” which represent His churches. He knows all about us. Now, notice how Jesus identifies Himself in v.14 of our text. He is:

A. The Amen, the Faithful and True Witness - The word “Amen” is an affirmation of the truth of a statement. It is a word of assurance that what is stated is firm, true and reliable. Why does Christ call Himself the “Amen”? He is giving the absolute assurance that what He is about to say is the absolute truth. What Jesus says is true because God is the embodiment of truth. In fact, Isa. 65:15 says God is the “God of truth [Heb. *Amen*].” His every word is true. He will not dilute the truth; He will not distort the truth. He says what He means and means what He says. 25 times in the Gospel of John Jesus introduced a statement by saying, “Truly, truly” or “*Amen, amen* I say to you...”

¹ The city of Laodicea was established by Antiochus II and named after his first wife Laodice.

Then He adds a similar statement about Himself. He is “the faithful and true witness.” This may have been added for the Greek reader, since “Amen” was originally a Hebrew word. That phrase means that we can count on Him to give true testimony.

So how does this apply to the church in Laodicea? He sees a lukewarm church that is also spiritually blind and impoverished and He tells them the truth about themselves in a memorable and graphic way. He is assuring this church that what He is about to say is true. He does so because the church did not see themselves as lukewarm and spiritually blind and poor. Instead, they viewed themselves as rich (v.17).

Now how does the way Jesus identifies Himself apply to us? We should believe that the Bible is the Truth of God. Of course, the apostate church of today is denying or ignoring God’s Word, but Christ is the proof and affirmation of its truthfulness. If we ignore His truth, we do so to our own peril.

Then, in the last of v.14, Christ identifies Himself as:

B. The Origin of the Creation of God – My translation is “Beginning,” but this does not mean that Christ was the first creature God created. The word translated “beginning” (*arche*) can also mean “source” or “origin.” It can refer to “the active cause.” So He was the originating source of creation (cf. Col. 1:18). He was the One through whom God created. John 1:3 says, “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” (See also Heb 1:2).

I also found that the word (*arche*) is used 11 times of someone in authority.² In that case, Christ would be saying He is the Ruler of creation. After all, He who creates has the right to rule (cf. Mt. 28:18).

This means that Jesus not only deserves to be Lord because He died for you, but also because He created you. He has all authority to speak and what He says is the absolute truth.

So we see in v.14 the correspondent of this letter. Because of His Lordship and character, we ought to pay attention and give heed to what He is about to say! So are you ready to listen? Well, let’s also see from our text:

II. THE CONDEMNATION OF THIS LETTER

With nothing good to say about this church, He begins to rebuke the church right away. So He says in v.15, “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot....” Then in v.16 He says, “because you are lukewarm....” This is the most scathing rebuke to be found in any of the seven letters. The Lord indicates here that there are 3 types of people, spiritually. Some are spiritually cold. This refers to those who are cold to the things of Christ. They are described as the hard ground in the parable of the sower (Mt. 13:4, 19). The gospel leaves them totally unmoved. They are spiritually dead, cold, ungodly, and unconcerned. Then there are those who are spiritually hot. This refers to true believers who have genuine spiritual fervor. They have experienced the new birth, which has transformed them from the coldness of death to the warmth of life. They are passionate about the Lord. (Also see Walvoord, p.92). Then, so many are spiritually lukewarm, like the believers of Laodicea. The lukewarm Christian is complacent, apathetic, and does not realize his need (v.17b). This condition happens all too often. Maybe you were saved many years ago, and you used to be on fire for God. There was a time when you couldn’t wait to get to church again to hear the precious Word of God. There was a time when you had a burning concern for souls, but the fire has died out. But from v.16 and v.20 I get the idea that many of the religiously lukewarm

² Luke 12:11; 20:20; Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10; 2:15; Tit. 3:1.

may not be Christians at all, but they have been touched by the gospel and only outwardly appear to be Christians.

Jesus used an analogy that was familiar to the Laodiceans. So consider with me:

A. The Comparison of Lukewarmness - In the district around Laodicea (esp. Hierápolis; Col. 4:13), there were some hot mineral springs. On the other hand, there was a cold spring of water that issued forth from the side of a mountain at nearby Colossae. It boasted some of the finest and best tasting water in the region. The worst water to drink would be lukewarm mineral water. In fact, they have discovered that water brought to Laodicea by means of an aqueduct and piping left mineral deposits and by the time it reached the city, it would have been lukewarm.

I remember when I was a boy I would go to my grandmother Felker's house in Atlanta, GA. She believed in drinking mineral water and lived to be 94 years old! So she wanted *me* to drink her mineral water. Have you ever had mineral water? It was *awful*. But if the water was very cold, I could drink it. But lukewarm mineral water was nauseating and ill-tasting. The same thing tends to be true of other drinks. You either want it hot, or cold, but certainly not lukewarm. Do you want to drink lukewarm coffee? I sure don't! [Illus.#C-3258]

So Jesus may be saying, "I would rather that you be cold toward me and the things of God than lukewarm." That would only be true if they were only religious and lukewarm, and not even true Christians. Probably the hardest person to reach for Christ is someone who is somewhat religious, but not truly saved. On the other hand, Christ may have said I would rather you be cold only because He was using an analogy from the waters they were very familiar with,³ and thus we shouldn't apply that part of the analogy.

Why, then, were they lukewarm? Well consider with me:

B. The Cause of their Lukewarmness – I believe we see this in v.17, "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy,⁴ and have need of nothing'..." Why does something hot cool down to being lukewarm? It is because heat is not being added constantly. The Laodicean church was independent, self-satisfied, and secure. They said, "We have need of nothing!"⁵ and so they didn't even seek daily fellowship with Christ through prayer. Yet Jesus said, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). And so without daily dependence upon Christ to renew the fire in their soul, they became lukewarm. They had a smug, self-sufficiency about them. Indeed, so long as things go well, people think they can do without God.

How could they have become like this? Laodicea was a wealthy city. It was located at the strategic crossroads for trade. It was a banking center. They also prospered due to raising sheep, which provided some of the finest wool available. They manufactured clothing from that wool. It was also a center for healing, especially eye salve. Many Jews lived there and prospered in business. No doubt some of these wealthy Jews professed faith in Christ and were part of this church. Some recipients of this letter would have remembered the earthquake of 60 A.D. that leveled much of the city. Laodicea was so prosperous that they did not even accept assistance from Rome to rebuild their city. They prided themselves in being self-sufficient. Evidently, the spirit of

³ Patterson says, "to suggest that the living Lord preferred the church to have ice cold aloofness in its reaction to the things of God... Is clearly preposterous" (p.139).

⁴ This is actually the perfect tense verb form of the previous word "rich" (πλουσιος), they became rich in the past and continue to remain wealthy.

⁵ Israel experienced a similar problem. Hosea 12:8 says, "And Ephraim said, 'Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself; In all my labors They shall find in me no iniquity that is sin.'"

such self-sufficiency crept into the church so that their values became twisted. The board at the Laodicean church could proudly show the latest annual financial report with its impressive statistics. The people in the church were more prosperous than most Christians, and so the church had good offerings and had no needs. Instead of trusting in God, they trusted in their own resources. Wiersbe asked a searching question for the church today? “Why is it that so many church bulletins and letterheads show pictures of buildings? Are these the things that are most important to us?”

In contrast, those who are in great need and know it are the ones who are the most earnest in praying and seeking help from God. It’s really not bad to be in a situation where all you have is God!

Well, besides having a spirit of self-sufficiency, how else can we tell that we have become lukewarm? Will consider with me:

C. The Characteristics of the Spiritually Lukewarm - See if these characteristics are true in your life:

1. Pretension, a Form of Godliness - Jesus said in v.15, “I know your works....” They had religious works. They attended their church and did some acts of service. But they evidently lacked any zeal and enthusiasm in working for the Lord. Even so, in 2 Tim. 3:5 we read that in the last days, men will have a form of godliness, but deny the power thereof. Such profess to be Christians, but who play religious games with God. Satan, the master deceiver, has led them to believe that just because they have walked the isle, prayed a prayer, and joined the church, they are Christians.

Too many have outwardly conformed to the requirements of the church without a true state of being born again into the family of God. I hope you know if the Spirit of God is using these words to speak to you. Are you among those who have joined the church, you attend just enough to get you by, you give a little in the offering, but you lack the power of true godliness that is supplied by the Spirit of the Living God. Are your religious works just a matter of going through the motions?

2. Compromise with the World - Too many are living close enough to the church to be warmed by the church and close enough to the world to be chilled by the world and live like the world. Since they said, “I am rich, have become wealthy...,” that probably meant that the church at Laodicea had a good number of members who worshipped God on the one hand, but also participated in the trade guilds which included pagan feasts. (Cf. Mounce, p.123). It is very likely that the people of Laodicea drew the line when religion began to interfere with their business. So, to stay hot for Jesus, we need to insulate ourselves from the world’s sinful ways.

D. The Reasons We Should Avoid Lukewarmness - As you can see, being spiritually lukewarm is a very bad condition. In fact, according to v.15, it is worse than being spiritually cold. So why should we be diligent to avoid this spiritual condition? In addition to what I have already said, it is:

1. Because We Deal with Solemn, Eternal Realities - As Christians we have to deal with death, with heaven, with hell, with Christ, with Satan, with souls that must live forever. Can we deal with such realities with a lukewarm spirit, or with an apathetic and cold spirit? Perhaps you remember when a relative, neighbor, or friend died, and the reality of death caused you to wonder if you did what you could to point that person to the Savior, and godly living. You can’t be lukewarm in the face of death and eternity. But many a lukewarm Christian believes with his head that there is

a hell, yet he has tearless eyes, and never seeks to snatch souls from going down into the pit. By his life he is telling the lost world that there really isn't a hell. Jesus is no big deal after all.

By the way, how many of us are lukewarm about our sports team? They do not call it "March Madness" for no reason. We will spend hours each week following our team. We will be so happy when they win, and sad when they lose, and we will complain about a bad call by the referees. Yet even winning the World Series or a national championship has no eternal significance whatsoever! Our sports trophies and memorabilia collect dust and most will be thrown away within a few years of our death.

Furthermore, we should not be lukewarm:

2. Because Christ Deserves our All – Aren't you glad that Jesus was not lukewarm concerning you? Didn't Christ think that our salvation was so important that He left the glories of heaven to save us? Didn't He think enough of our redemption that He was willing to suffer and shed His own precious blood in order to complete it? Here we see Christ, zealous for our souls, and yet so many are lukewarm about Christ and His work? Surely we should say, "O Jesus, You are worthy of the best place in the human heart! You should be loved more than anyone!" To do less is an insult to Christ. Jesus demanded of us total commitment, even to the point of taking up our cross and forsaking all for Him (Luke 14:27, 33).

3. Because of the Judgment of God against such Lukewarmness – In the last of v.16 Christ says, "I will vomit you out of My mouth." That's graphic, isn't it? He is alluding to the lukewarm water illustration. Christ is saying that He will reject such a church. Christ is saying that such a church is sickening to Him. As your body rejects bad food or drink through vomiting, even so Christ thoroughly rejects those who are lukewarm concerning Him. Many Christians and churches are concerned about what the *world* thinks of us. We ought to be far more concerned about what *Christ* thinks of us! Would Christ say to you at the final judgment, "Depart from me, I never knew you!" (Mt. 7:23).

And notice the other verdict of Christ against this church in the last of v.17, "...and⁶ do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." They were blind to their own spiritual poverty. Christ even uses the word that refers to abject poverty, which must have surprised the congregation the most. They were also surprised to hear of their spiritual nakedness.⁷ The Laodiceans were famous for their clothing. They raised and sheared soft, black wool from sheep and made black or dark garments which were exported all over the world Physical nakedness was hardly a problem in such a city. Yet Jesus says they are spiritually naked, not clothed with true righteousness. If this church did not repent, they would soon be dealt with by Christ. And how can we stand at the Judgment Seat of Christ if we have lived as lukewarm Christians?

Oh professing Christian, we must make a choice: Either give up your profession, or be true to it. If you really are God's people, then love and serve Him with *all* your heart, mind, and strength. The great curse of the church is the lukewarmness of its members. Such misrepresent the gospel.

So we have seen the problem of lukewarmness in the church, and why we should avoid it. Now let's see:

⁶ The original Greek adds an emphatic "you" (σὺ) here.

⁷ This Scripture is a wake-up call for any church that evaluates their own spiritual health. Without careful discernment by the Holy Spirit and by means of Scripture, we could be totally wrong!

III. THE COUNSEL OF THIS LETTER

What should we do if we realize that we have become lukewarm?

A. Seek the Cure for Self-Sufficiency – Jesus says in v.18, “I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed.” Jesus counsels them to pay the price to get *true* riches. They would use fire to melt the gold and cause impurities to rise to the surface and be removed. The reference to “gold refined in the fire” suggests that the church needed the fire of persecution (1 Peter 1:7) and other forms of suffering. Up to this point they were physically well-off rather than persecuted for their faith. Several others of the 7 churches were persecuted. For example, the church in Smyrna was a persecuted church, and our Lord had nothing negative to say that that church. But not the Laodicean church. Nothing makes God’s people examine their priorities faster than suffering!

I have read the book, *Baptists and the Bible*. Many years ago, Baptists in England were jailed and even died for their beliefs. So Baptists were the leaders in fighting for religious freedom. Then I read what happened after articles of toleration were signed in England. As soon as Baptists and others were free from persecution there was a significant spiritual decline in the vitality of the churches! What does that tell you! [Illus.#C-3259]

I believe the true church in America is about to face persecution. It has already started to some degree, but the situation is worse in Canada. Yet that is not necessarily going to be bad for us. Persecution will purge the church of hypocrites and revive the true people of God.

Then Christ counsels them to buy “white⁸ garments, that you may be clothed...” According to Revelation 19:8, we should be clothed in “fine linen, clean and white,” and this symbolizes “the righteous acts of the saints” (NASB). Salvation means that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us, put to our account; but sanctification means that His righteousness is imparted to us, and we *become* righteous in character and conduct. They needed a new zeal for good works and righteous living.

Finally, in the last of v.18, He counsels them to “anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.” They were blind to their own need and spiritual poverty. The first step in addressing a problem is to *see* that you have a problem! So the Lord counsels them to anoint their eyes with the eye salve *He* would provide. The city of Laodicea was noted for its eye salve, developed from the minerals prevalent in the area. But the kind of medication the saints needed was not available from a pharmacy. Only the Great Physician can help us see our true spiritual condition, especially as we also read His Holy Word.

Finally, let’s see together:

B. The Cure for Lukewarmness

1. Accept the Rebuke – Jesus says in v.19, “As many as I love, I rebuke....” Christ loves you. If Christ didn’t care for you and the countless souls that your life will come in contact with, He would say nothing about your lukewarmness. When people rebuke us we tend to throw up our defenses. But don’t reject His loving words if the Spirit has applied them to your heart. Accept the rebuke with the attitude of, “What must I do, Lord, to make things right?” Don’t have the smug attitude reflected in the first part of v.17.

So let’s see what Christ says you must do to make things right:

⁸ White was in contrast to the dark woolen garments made in Laodicea.

2. Repent – This is what he commands at the very end of v.19. Whether you are a lukewarm Christian, or a lukewarm non-Christian, you must repent of this great sin. Change your mind and attitude about your apathy.

For some, the cure for being religiously lukewarm is to:

3. Welcome Christ into Your Life – Jesus says in v.20, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” This verse indicates that Christ was outside their meeting place, knocking to get in! It was as if they had driven Christ out of the Church when he should be in the midst! (Mt. 18:20). What does that tell you? For the most part, their lukewarm, pretentious Christianity was not real. And the only cure for lukewarmness is readmission of the excluded Christ. A church is not a church without Christ in the midst. A professing Christian is not a Christian without Christ in their heart.

And what a picture of salvation this is! Salvation is first of all a personal decision. Christ says, “If anyone.” Jesus pleads with individuals today, “I want to come into your life. I want you to open the door of your heart and let Me in.” No one can make that decision for you.

Second, it’s a voluntary decision. Christ knocks; He does not force His way into your heart and life. When Christ came the first time, “He came unto His own, but His own received Him not” (Jn.1:11). He did not force anyone to receive Him.

Holman Hunt captured the scene of v.20 in a famous painting. It shows Christ as the light of the world, wearing a crown of thorns, standing outside, patiently knocking and calling for admittance. When it was first displayed, a critic said, “Mr. Hunt, you have painted a masterpiece, but you have made one very serious mistake. You have painted a door without a handle.” “That is no mistake,” replied the artist. “The handle is on the inside!” Oh friend, you have to make the decision to accept Christ. Don’t reject Him. He is the best friend you have ever had (Jn. 15:13). And yet sad to say, many reject the blessed Son of God. But don’t you do it. How can you? Becoming a Christian is furthermore described in John 1:12 like this, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.”

4. Have Daily Fellowship with Christ – Jesus said in the last of v.20, “I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.” To avoid lukewarmness in the Christian life, we must have daily fellowship with Christ. A shared meal in the ancient Jewish world had far more significance than it has today. It was a symbol of affection, of fellowship, of friendship. The particular meal referred to was supper,⁹ the main meal of the day that would be eaten in a relaxed manner after a day of work. Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees not merely for associating with tax collectors and sinners but especially for *eating* with them (Lk. 15:2; cf. also Acts 11:3). So the present verse contains a promise of the most intimate fellowship possible. That intimate fellowship with Christ on a daily basis is so important!

I want to commend all of you who are spending time with Christ each day with the devotional book, “Come to the Lord’s Table.” May that begin or reinforce a daily habit of spending time with Christ by prayer and Bible reading.

We also need to make sure that Jesus is the honored guest and the focus of our worship. He should be loved, honored, and enthroned in our hearts. Let’s not push Him out with self-sufficiency, self-righteousness and self-centeredness.

Finally, we need to:

5. Be Zealous – That’s what Jesus *commands* in the last of v.19. It is evident that Christ has in mind here those in the Laodicean church who were actually born again but whose

⁹ Based on the Greek verb used here (*deipneo*).

lives have taken on the same lukewarm characteristics as those about them who were merely professing Christians.¹⁰ What we must do is be humble enough to ask God to revive the sincerity of our repentance, the eagerness of our desires, and the flaming passion of our hearts. To be zealous is a Christian responsibility. Rom. 12:11 says that we are to be “not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.” The great preacher of Apollos was fervent in spirit according to Acts 18:25. And as the present tense indicates, it should be a continuous characteristic. Seek to have a zeal and enthusiasm for the Lord on a daily basis. Are you passionate about serving the Lord?

Conclusion: Jesus says in v.22, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Will you give heed to what Jesus says here? If you have realized today that you are not a Christian, will you open the door of your heart to Christ?

I’m going to conclude by showing you something you are asked about at the beginning of, “Come to the Lord’s Table.” In light of this message, what would be your answer? If any of us are lukewarm, will you obey His commands to repent, welcome Him, have daily fellowship with Him, and be zealous?

Sources: William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (New York: Abingdon press, 1957); W. A. Criswell, *Expository Sermons on Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962-1966); Vance Havner, *Repent or Else! The Seven Church of Revelation* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1958); George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman’s Publishing Co., 1972); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Church in Prophetic Perspective: Revelation 2-3* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1985); Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary, The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman’s Publishing Co., 1977); Paige Patterson, *The New American Commentary: Revelation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2012); John Philips, *Exploring Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1974); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 205-214; ; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1966); Warren W. Wiersbe, “*Be*” *Series: New Testament Volumes 1 & 2: Book* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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¹⁰ But compare use of *phileo* in v.19 instead of *agapao*. Could Christ use *phileo* of a non-Christian?