

The Church of Laodicea, Part 2

We all have a tendency to give labels to people to describe what we think about them. For instance, we might say “*He’s just a lazy bum*” or we might use phrases like “*one generous individual, the most dedicated person I know, the unluckiest person I have ever met, best father on the planet*”, and so on. Obviously, the label we give someone can be good or it can be bad. Well, here in [Revelation 3:14-22](#) Jesus gives the church of Laodicea a label that we simply do not want. When Jesus refers to someone as being “**lukewarm**” that it is not something good – not at all. It is not a spiritual label that you really want to wear.

Now, what I want to do here at the beginning is to just talk briefly about Laodicea to help us better understand why Jesus said what He said to them. From a purely worldly perspective, they had everything going for them. Of the seven churches that Jesus spoke to, the church at Laodicea was by far the most impressive outwardly. They had it all. However, from a spiritual perspective Jesus had nothing good to say about them – not one thing. Whatever it was that they were doing as a church or had as a church, He was not at all impressed. The word “Laodicea” is a compound word from “*laos*” meaning people and “*dike*” meaning rule, or literally, a city where the people ruled. Obviously this had found its way into the church. Rather than God ruling these people’s lives, it was a church being ruled and swayed by people’s opinions and ideas.

Laodicea was a very, very wealthy city, and it was their wealth that gave them a false sense of security about where they were in their Christian life. It was a great garment manufacturing center and pioneered garments being mass-produced, and therefore cheaper. They were also a major banking center which made them even more wealthy. History has seemed to bear out that when the church enjoys an abundance of worldly success that it becomes fairly indifferent and almost oblivious to its real spiritual needs. It is like its economic wealth lulls it to sleep spiritually. The average household income worldwide outside of the United States is \$9733. That averages out to \$187 per week, or about \$4.68 per hour. The average yearly income for an American is nearly \$48,000 per year. You know what you make per year and it is probably much more than that, so just do the math to see where you may rank financially compared to someone in another country.

The unfortunate history of God’s people seems to be that the more that He blesses them, the further and further away they begin to drift from Him. Listen to how this condition is described in [Deuteronomy 8:11-16](#),

Dt 8:11 (NKJV) "Beware that you do not forget the LORD your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, ¹² lest--*when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them;* ¹³ and *when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied;* ¹⁴ when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; ¹⁵ who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, *in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock;* ¹⁶ who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end--

What a wealthy setting seems to do for many Christians who are not very settled in their commitment to Christ is that it causes them to lose focus on what is actually important in their life. It is never about what you have or do not have, but who you love or do not love. Jesus spoke once in [Mark 4:19](#) and said that the “**cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches**” actually “**choke out**” the Word of God from a person’s life and they eventually become “**unfruitful**”. That is exactly what happened in Laodicea.

Now, why this is important is because when persecution arose against Christians after Christ, history is virtually silent that any of the Christians in Laodicea were actually persecuted by the Jews. Laodicea was primarily a very large Jewish settlement, so what that silence seems to indicate is that the Christian church in Laodicea had become so complacent and self-sufficient with its wealth that it had completely ceased to have any effectiveness or influence for Christ. Unfortunately, it is very easy to carry our prideful self-sufficiency into our relationship with God and Christ. Trust me, but self-sufficiency is a death knoll for a meaningful relationship with God. God wants us to depend on Him for virtually everything and every area of our life. The comparison to the modern church in America is eerily familiar. You can appreciate why Jesus used the analogies that He did when they said “**I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing...**” ([v17](#)). That was exactly how the Christians in Laodicea perceived their Christian life. They were totally satisfied with where they were spiritually. I wonder where you think that you are spiritually. I wonder if you would really like for Jesus to make an assessment of your life and put your life on a commitment scale of 1-10. Just think about it for a little while as to where He would place you on that scale.

Secondly, the city of Laodicea did not have any natural water supply or springs of water, so they had to build an aqueduct from some hot mineral springs nearly five miles away. Even if the water cooled down some, the water was still very tepid and lukewarm when it arrived in Laodicea and it had so many negative minerals in it and was so impure that it was constantly causing people to vomit. That is exactly why Jesus used the phrase in [v16](#) where He said “**I will vomit you out of my mouth**”. These people clearly understood this kind of language. So, you can understand the kind of impact this message would have had on those from Laodicea who read this. Jesus was not making up some analogy or using words that these people could not identify with, but to the contrary, every word of this passage is based on the historical reality of how these Laodiceans were living.

Thirdly, the city was also famous for a soft, black wool that it produced. They used it to make expensive clothes and carpet, and it was a source of great wealth for them. They were also an important center for ancient medicines, and the most famous medicine they made was a particular eye salve which was exported all over the world. Jesus mentions all of this when He says in [Revelation 3:18](#),

Rev 3:18 (NASB) **I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.**

Now, if we are going to properly understand how we are to relate to eschatology and the events of the last days, we need to make sure that we understand what it means to be “**hot, cold**”, and “**lukewarm**”. Those who are identified as “**hot**” are those who are spiritually alive and who are reflecting that through a transformed life. They live like Christians and have a fervent love for Christ and His church. “**Hot**”

is the Greek word “*zestos*”, a word which means “**boiling hot**.” It refers metaphorically to spiritual fervor, to having a spiritual zest and vitality for the things of God. In this context, it represents that someone is actually saved and genuinely alive to the Word of God and what it requires of them. All you have to do is to look at their life and it immediately becomes obvious that they are Christians. Their love for Jesus is fervent, boiling hot, passionate, zealous, intense – everything it should be. If others were to look at your life, there should never, ever be any doubt as to the fact that you are a committed follower of Jesus Christ. There should never be anything in your life that would ever cause them to think differently. When they see you, they should see a reflection of Christ, a manifestation of godliness, and a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Apparently, this is what Jesus did not see in Laodicea.

However, when we come to the word “**cold**”, it seems to create somewhat of a dilemma. If we give it a purely negative connotation, then it would seem somewhat unusual that Jesus would actually prefer someone to be “**hot or cold**”. If we interpret the word “**cold**” to represent those who are not saved, or those who are Christians, but have no spiritual interest or hunger for spiritual life, then why would Jesus actually say that He would prefer that over at least being “**lukewarm**”? If Jesus is talking about someone who is unmoved by the gospel, indifferent to the Bible, unresponsive to the message of Christ, and uninterested in Christ’s church, then why would He commend that over being “**lukewarm**”? In some ways, it seems that it could actually be a good quality. Cold water is really good on a hot day. For instance, [Matthew 10:42](#) is the only place outside of [Revelation 3:15-16](#) where this particular word for “**cold**” is used in the New Testament and it says,

Mt 10:42 (NKJV) And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward."

So, it could signify a good quality in which either hot water or cold water can be very good and very refreshing. I love to take hot showers and drink cold water.

However, I do not believe that is how it should be interpreted – even though some have. “**Hot**” and “**cold**” are words of contrast and represent two extremes similar to up or down, light or dark, in or out, big or small. If “**hot**” represents those individuals who are spiritually alive and who reflect that through a transformed life and who genuinely live like Christians and have a fervent love for Christ and His church, then those who are “**cold**” are in contrast to that way of life. By contrast, they would be the exact opposite. The word “**cold**” is best understood as those who actually reject Christ. There is nothing about the gospel that moves them at all. They could hear it a thousand times and never be touched by its message. They simply are not saved and quite frankly do not want to be saved. Being a Christian is kind of a repulsive idea to them. Whenever they hear the Word of God, it evokes absolutely no response from them other than disdain and disrespect. They have no interest in God, in Christ, in the church, in the Word of God, or in biblical truth. Stated another way that may put this into perspective is that they are not hypocrites about what they believe. They do not believe in Christ and make no bones about it. Unfortunately, there are many in the church like this. You could preach your heart out to them with burning passion and accuracy, but week after week they leave completely unmoved, unchanged, and unwilling to be either.

One important area that we will study later on is that during the church age that the church will be composed of the saved and the lost at the same time. In fact, the Word of God actually directs us to

leave the saved and the lost together until the end of the age when He Himself will make the separation. The biblical terms to represent this are “**the wheat and the tares, the sheep and the goats, the good fish and the bad fish**”. Some of this comes from the parable in [Matthew 13:24-30](#),

Mt 13:24 (NKJV) Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. ²⁶ But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. ²⁷ So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' ²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."

He says something very similar in the parable in [Matthew 13:47-50](#) which says,

Mt 13:47 (NKJV) "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, ⁴⁸ which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, ⁵⁰ and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

So, the theological dilemma that these two words “**hot**” and “**cold**” create is really very simple. I think that the answer to the dilemma is that one attribute that God hates greater than no faith is what we would call a hypocritical faith. A hypocritical faith has no real conviction about what the Bible says. At some point in your life, you have to make a clear choice between God’s Word and your opinion about His Word. There is no one farther from the truth than the person who makes an idle profession without genuine faith. So, a hypocritical faith says one thing, but lives a completely different way – and that is what we would call being “**lukewarm**”. The “**lukewarm**” person does not fit into either category. A person who is “**lukewarm**” is someone who does not openly reject the gospel. They like the idea of heaven and certainly are not opposed to going there. They are the people who attend church and give the appearance of being saved, but in reality there is nothing heartfelt about what they are doing. Life just continues without much, if any, response to the Word of God.

In many of these people, the problem is that there is no spiritual life in them by which they could have a heartfelt response to the Word of God. However, because of the context of this passage in [Revelation 3](#), it can most likely also refer to actual Christians who are indifferent or apathetic because in actuality they are non-committed to Christ and have become very self-sufficient and self-satisfied. Most likely they are the Sunday morning church- attenders who claim to know Christ, but who have no real spiritual fruit in their life. They are content to be religious and to give the impression that they are God-lovers. They are simply hypocrites playing spiritual games, and it appears that they make Christ nauseated.

I personally think that it is more difficult to reach these kind of so-called believers with the gospel than the man who simply denies Christ. If you talk to almost any serious pastor, it would be readily apparent that they do not sense that the majority of their people are even interested in being in church on a Sunday morning to hear the Word of God being preached for them. “**Hot**” is not something that they can actually

identify with in the lives of many of their members. It is just business as usual down at the church with little to no spiritual change whatsoever – simply “**lukewarm**” and uninterested and unmoved.

So, the “**lukewarm**” state refers to those who have manifested some interest in the things of God. They may be professing Christians who attend a church, but they have fallen far short of a true testimony for Christ and their attitude and actions raise questions concerning the reality of their spiritual life. They may have been touched by the gospel at one time or another, but it is not clear whether they really belong to Christ. It is apparent that there is something about this intermediate state of being “**lukewarm**” that is utterly obnoxious to God. If we miss that simple point, then in reality, there is a good chance that we will completely miss the message of this passage.

How many church members are in reality very far from God, yet by their membership in some church they have casually and proudly satisfied their own hearts and have been lulled into a sense of false security about their salvation? Over the last several years I have consistently used the term “*casual indifference*” to refer to this kind of attitude. In the history of the human race, no one has been harder to reach for Christ than the religious person, the one who is quite satisfied with their measure of devotion to God and with their mediocre commitment to His church. It should be very clear from the gospels that it is far easier to win the harlots and publicans to Christ than the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Then, to make it all the more worse, the lukewarmness of the Laodiceans was compounded by their being self-deceived. Unfortunately, they had made a wrong self-assessment of where they really were spiritually. Listen once again to how Jesus described their deception in [Revelation 3:17](#),

Rev 3:17 (NKJV) **Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked--**

Their lack of spiritual perception, devotion, and faith in God were simply being manifested by their lukewarm state. You have to think about that for a moment. You have to make a personal self-assessment. These verses do not give you an option.

So, Jesus’ simple message to the Christians in Laodicea was to “**be zealous and repent**” (v19) – which is not a happy message for today’s modern uninterested church member. The problem that this particular church had is that it did not think that it had any problems. It had become so self-satisfied with itself that it was now what Jesus stated as being “**blind**” (v17). They had no idea where they were spiritually. So it is with many churches in our day who are convinced that all of their social activities and programs are an indicator of their spiritual health. Having lost all capability of introspection of their life by God’s Word, they are unable to assess their condition by anything other than self-serving ministry statistics. I despise the “*nickels and noses*” mentality that our denomination has created. I actually believe that it is repulsive to Christ. As churches grow in influence and numbers, very often their willingness to even evaluate their spiritual needs continually wanes until they reach a condition much like that of the Laodicean church. The contrasts in these verses are shocking - between what the Laodiceans think they are and what they really are, between what they see and what Jesus sees, and between their worldly wealth and their own spiritual bankruptcy. In other words, this church was useless to the Lord and His purposes for the church in the world.

My assessment of these verses is that many of these lukewarm individuals were probably saved. Listen once again to v19.

Rev 3:19 (NKJV) As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

These are words spoken to believers. Jesus said He loved these people, but He also said that there were clearly areas of their life for which they needed to “**be zealous and repent**”. [Hebrews 12:6](#) says,

Heb 12:6 (NKJV) For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.”

I cannot tell you what the chastening will be, but I am sure that it will be effective when it happens. God never wastes His discipline of those He loves. I do not want to wear the label of being “**lukewarm**”, and I desperately hope that neither do you.