

HOT OR COLD REV. 3:14-22

We have been studying the 7 churches who were the recipients of John's Revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have already seen how that these churches represent the gamut of Christian Churches in any age, and John has dealt with differing issues with each individual church. With the church of Ephesus, the issue was losing the first love, growing cold to that initial zeal. With the church of Smyrna, the issue was physical persecution and enduring it successfully. With the church of Pergamum, the issue was compromise in worship, toleration of gods who are not gods and beliefs that are not true. With the church of Sardis, the issue was spiritual apathy, and the exhortation was to wake up. With the church of Philadelphia, the issue was missionary opportunity, moving thru open doors of opportunity to spread the gospel.

We come this morning to the church at Laodicea. The church in this community was different from some of the others, and they therefore, faced some different areas of struggle. There have been many misconceptions about this church and the message that John gave to it. Especially with regards to Christ's words saying that he preferred that they be hot or even cold rather than being lukewarm. Many have interpreted the symbolism of being hot representing being on fire for the Lord and being cold representing not recognizing God at all. We all know that God would prefer that his creation be fully dedicated to him. But that he would rather have them be totally opposed to him, atheists, in direct opposition to his programs, than be nominal Christians, Christians who are lukewarm, is that really the case? As we think about the implications of such an interpretation, and as we compare Scriptures with Scripture, we begin to wonder- could this actually be what Christ was saying thru John? He is writing to believers in His church- what about this matter of spitting them out of his mouth? Would God actually spit those who are lukewarm, nominal Christians, out of his mouth? It is at this point, as with all of the other churches, that we must be sure that we interpret Gods word in light of the setting into which it was written. And especially as we look at this specific church in Laodicea in its cultural and historical context, all of the statements which John makes here in these verses begin to take on new light and meaning. Happily, we have just been looking at the principles of interpreting the Bible with regards to its content, context and culture/history during our Sunday School time here in August. Now we are going to have another opportunity to put these principles into practice.

Now as we just saw in our video, the city of Laodicea was a wealthy, self-sufficient, proud community. It was known as the center of banking in all of Asia Minor. To compare Laodicea to our modern world, Laodicea would have been the Wall Street in John's day. And they were very proud of their financial independence. We already saw last week when we looked at Philadelphia how this entire region was subject to earthquakes,

being near a great fault in the earth's crust. About 40 years before John wrote this letter, a great earthquake had ravaged this region. The cities of Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea were the hardest hit- each one being almost completely leveled. Sardis and Philadelphia had appealed to Rome for emergency aid to help the rebuilding process, and had received as was the custom both a relief for a period of time from any taxation so that internal monies could be used to rebuild the city and outside emergency funds from Rome to help in the process. Laodicea, on the other hand, had refused any monies offered from Rome. This city was wealthy enough that she could just rebuild herself, and she took great pride in her financial independence, her self-sufficiency, the fact that she was in control of her destiny and not in need of outside resources.

Besides the banking industry another of the areas that had brought Laodicea great prominence and wealth was the fact that the citizens of this area had perfected a certain breed of dark-wooled sheep. Strabo, the ancient geographer, says of Laodicea: "the country around Laodicea breeds excellent sheep, remarkable not only for the softness of their wool, in which they surpass the Milesian sheep, but also for their dark or raven color." This wool was manufactured in factories in Laodicea into 4 major kinds of outer garments that were literally shipped all over the known world. One of these outer tunics, called the trimita, became so famously identified with Laodicea, that Laodicea was sometimes referred to as Trimitaria among peoples of other lands.

But there was a third area of prominence in Laodicea and we want to focus a bit more on this one. Laodicea had a famous medical school in her town, and a doctor who had developed a certain kind of salve for ear problems and eye problems. This medicine was manufactured in Laodicea in tablet form and then shipped out throughout the Roman Empire where it would be ground down into powder once again to be applied to the ears and eyes. We don't know anything today about the chemical formula that was used, but we do know that the Laodiceans were very much known for their ear and eye medicine, and for the fact that they were on the cutting edge of medical technology in their day. In addition to the medical formulas that had been developed, part of the blessing of being near a fault in the earth's crust that brought the earthquakes was the availability of hot mineral springs. These were used as medicinal baths and peoples came from all over to be treated at the medical school and to bath in the mineral hot springs which were thought to have healing powers. Quick to take advantage of every situation, the Laodiceans had actually engineered an elaborate piping system which both piped hot water from the mineral springs some 6 miles north into the city, and which also piped the cold water from the mountain streams, so that the city of Laodicea had a luxury unknown in the other cities of Asia Minor. They had hot and cold running water right into their town. The hot, mineral water brought healing power to Laodicea. People with aches and pains and illnesses would soak in its

soothing properties getting relief from their sore muscles. And the cold, mountain water would bring refreshment to the citizens of Laodicea. There is nothing quite like fresh, cold water to quench a thirsty body.

And so I trust that you are beginning to sense the atmosphere in which this church was located. The values of the citizens of Laodicea were financial independence, materialistic luxury and good health with medical technologies. They wanted to have lots of money and luxuries, and the health and time to enjoy them all. And it is evident from John's words that many of these values had rubbed off in the Christian Church that was located there.

Now with this background in mind, let's look at John's specific words to this church.

He says to them, "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." Clearly we have reference here to these values which the Laodiceans held to be so precious. Their material wealth, their luxury, their advanced medical practices - all of which led to a self-satisfied independence. Now there was nothing wrong with their wealth, or with their desires to advance technologically. The problem was in their response having acquired some of these things. They had become proud and so independent that they were beginning to get a wrong perspective on life. Their attitude was 'I don't need anyone or anything- I can make it on my own.' If an earthquake hits- we don't need Rome. If tragedy strikes- we can make it thru. And this attitude was being transferred to the spiritual realm where they were trying to live independently of God. The result- they were deceiving themselves. Christ said to them thru John- spiritually, don't you realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.' Your banking reserves are not enhancing your spiritual growth at all. All of the ointment that you can manufacture cannot bring to you increased spiritual vision. All of the trinita tunics that you push off of the assembly line are not clothing you spiritually. God has not designed for us to live spiritually independent from him- nor for that matter has he designed that we live physically independent from Him. God has designed that our lives be lived in continuous communion and fellowship with him, walking with him, deriving our strength from Him. So the attitude that we don't need anything from God, treating God like the Roman Empire who only comes to our aid when emergencies strike and gaining great pride from the fact that we can even make it thru emergencies without Him, this attitude is not an attitude of strength, but it is in reality a confession of severe weakness, spiritual weakness.

Now it is obvious that the Christians in Laodicea were being sorely influenced by the general values and attitudes of the city in which they were living. And this leads us to see the significance of the illustration that Christ uses in the cold, hot and lukewarm water. I believe in looking at the historical setting, it is improbable

that Christ is speaking of hot Christians (those on fire for the Lord), cold people who don't care anything about the Lord and nominal lukewarm Christians- saying that God would rather have someone who is cold- that is someone who doesn't care anything about Him at all- than a nominal Christian who is lukewarm. This would contradict other clear teachings in the Bible. Certainly, the Bible nowhere says that God prefers those who are opposed to Him to even the most backslidden Christian. God went to great pains to save one man named Lot out of the city of Sodom, and you can't find a clearer example of either a lukewarm believer or a cold people spiritually than in the case of Lot and Sodom. No, we must interpret this illustration used in light of the historical situation in this city.

As we mentioned earlier, Laodicea was unique in that it was a city with running water. It had both hot and cold running water. The hot water came from the hot mineral springs; the cold came from the cool, mountain springs. These sources were both healthful and refreshing. People came from miles to bath in those hot mineral springs- and we all know that there is nothing quite as refreshing as a nice, hot bath to tired, weary bones, especially if you add soothing minerals to it. In the same way, there is nothing quite as refreshing as a drink from a cold, mountain stream to one who is thirsty. But if you mix the 2 together, the effect of the water is lost. Lukewarm, mineral water that smells and tastes like sulfur is neither soothing to bathe in nor fitting to drink. It is good for nothing. It makes a person sick and he spits it out of his mouth.

You see the point that John is making, don't you? The Laodiceans were living in a world that valued financial independence, materialistic luxury and physical wellbeing above all other values- even spiritual values. Many Christians in the church of Laodicea were being influenced by this thinking. Therefore, they were losing their impact on the city around them. They were neither hot nor cold - they had become lukewarm. The salt had lost its savor- it was not longer giving forth the healing power of God. And the fresh, living water that Jesus had offered to the woman at Jacob's well – that water that when one drank of it he would never thirst again – that water had become putrid and unappetizing. The church was not having the influence in the city of Laodicea that God designed for it to have.

Now what was the solution to their dilemma? Quickly, let me point out 2 necessities that John gives to them to correct their situation.

1. The first necessity was sincere repentance. "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." vs. 19. This church needed to realize that Christ loved them, that was the reason for his rebuke to them thru the pen of John. Christ knew that the hot or cold water was much more fulfilling. He knew that lukewarm water not worth anything. And so this letter was a demonstration of Christ's love for his church.

But it was necessary for them to change their direction if there was to be any possibility of regaining their former spiritual vitality.

2. And then notice the second necessity found in verse 20. "Here I am (Christ says)! 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." Did you see how personal the message suddenly becomes as we approached the remedy? To this point Christ has been speaking to the church at Laodicea- but now he speaks of anyone who will hear his voice, open the door and fellowship with Him. The solution to spiritual vitality and fruitfulness lies in the relationship with the person of the Lord Jesus Christ- and it lies there alone. If we are walking in a living and vibrant relationship with Christ, we cannot be lukewarm spiritually. We will be hot bringing God's healing power into lives and cold bringing God's life giving water. If we are not walking in a living and vibrant relationship with Christ, we cannot help but be influenced into a tepid condition by the world surrounding us where we lose our influence and power. And it doesn't matter if the whole world is lukewarm around us- it is possible to stand purely hot or cold for Christ. Abraham was not influenced by Lot's decision to move toward Sodom, but rather he made his own spiritual choices and stands today as a great example of faith. And so these Christians at Laodicea who would invite Christ back into fellowship in their lives would be able to regain the spiritual vitality that they had lost.

What a beautiful picture Christ paints here for us thru his servant John. These citizens of heaven had become too enamored with their citizenship in Laodicea. They had grasped those values of financial independence, materialistic luxury and physical wellbeing, and had begun to cherish these above all others. They thought that they had struck gold, that they were rich, but in reality they were poverty stricken. They were poor and wretched because they were holding most dear that which was of least eternal value. But what does Christ say to them? He comes in love and says, "I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire so that you can become rich- pureness of life which would bring spiritual riches rather than the lukewarmness of the society around them- and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness-not the trim tunic glistening in its dark splendor, but in reality a picture of the sins of this world which satisfy only for a season, but the pure, white garment of Christ's righteousness which won't wear out for all eternity, and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see- spiritual insight better than any ointment that an ophthalmologist can concoct, abilities to see spiritual truths beyond human understanding.

And so Christ comes to each of us today, and he warns us not to accept the values that the world around us are holding up as most precious- values that have not changed with the times. The world continues to tell us

that financial independence, materialistic luxury and physical fitness can bring to us lasting joy and satisfaction. Of course, times have changed and we have a higher degree in each of these areas than the citizens of Laodicea had- but these values are still not the answer. Be spiritually rich, be spiritually clothed, be spiritually fit- that's what really matters. And we can only be spiritually rich, and spiritually clothed and spiritually fit as we are spiritually united with Jesus Christ in a living, daily, intimate relationship. Have you been dining with the Lord Jesus Christ during this past week? If not, He's standing knocking outside your door right now. Won't you let him come in?