

**WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TO HEAR:
(8) A MESSAGE TO THE CHURCH ABOUT DEVOTION**

Revelation 3:14-22

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PROLOGUE

Greg went on a business trip for a few days. When he returned, his wife reported that the dog really missed him. "She spent every night at the front door, waiting for you to come home," she said.

"What an example of devotion," Greg replied. "I wonder if you'd be that concerned about me?"

"Honey," she answered, "if you were gone overnight, and I didn't know where you were, you can bet I'd be waiting for you at the front door!"

SCRIPTURE

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation: {15} "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. {16} So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. {17} For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. {18} Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. {19} I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. {20} Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. {21} To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. {22} Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Revelation 3:14-22 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

In the Academy Award winning movie, "Hannah and Her Sisters," the character of Frederick (played by actor Max von Sydow) reacts to the religious programming he sees on television and says, "If Jesus came back and saw what's going on in his name, he'd never stop throwing up." Many viewers were offended by this and considered it to be yet another example of Hollywood's relentless efforts to use the image of Jesus in shocking ways. But the irony is that Hollywood did not make this up. It is an image taken right from the Bible. It is found in the letter to the church at Laodicea in the Book of Revelation.

Ancient Laodicea did not have a natural water supply. One of its sister cities to the North, Hierapolis, was famous for its hot springs. Such geothermal water was highly prized for its therapeutic value. But the aqueduct that brought water to Laodicea was over six miles long so that by the time the water arrived it was lukewarm and often impure. More than one

ancient writer said that when he drank the water from Laodicea he wanted to throw up.

In his message to the congregation at Laodicea, Christ tells them that they have become like the city's water supply and he wants to spit them out. They are lukewarm in their worship, tepid in their discipleship, and meager in their fellowship.

Laodicea was the first congregation to be described in this way but unfortunately not the last. If we want to avoid becoming the spiritual equivalent of an emetic in Christ's mouth, we need to heat up our worship, refreshen our discipleship, and enrich our fellowship. In other words, we need to intensify the quality of our relationship with the Lord. The passage suggests at least three ways to do this.

1. HEAT UP A LUKEWARM WORSHIP

First of all, we need to HEAT UP our WORSHIP.

We can heat up our worship if we understand the purpose of worship. John speaks of "the origin of God's creation" (14). There is a purpose to creation. There is a reason why were made. This is made more explicit in the next chapter where we read:

"You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created everything, and it is for your pleasure that they exist and were created" (Rev 4:11 NLT).

God made you to enjoy you. God takes delight in your existence. He created the universe and placed you in it to be the object of his love. But there is something that God does not have unless you give it to him and that is your love for God. When you offer back to God something of what God has first given you that is an act of worship.

So your purpose in life is to worship God as a response to God's love for you. My purpose in life is to worship God as a response to God's love for me. Or to put it in historical terms, our purpose is to glorify God and enjoy God forever (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.1.).

I suspect that the Christians at Laodicea would have agreed with this purpose and yet their worship remained lukewarm. What they lacked was passion. And I think the reason they lacked passion was because they did not appreciate how much they needed God.

Christ says to them:

"For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing'" (17a).

Laodicea was a wealthy community. Like other cities in the region, it too was destroyed by an earthquake near the beginning of the First Century A.D. But unlike the other cities, they completely rebuilt themselves with their own money and with no assistance from the government or anyone else. This became a source of pride and produced an attitude of self-sufficiency even among members of the church. But it is quite unhealthy for a church to believe it needs no one, not even God!

Nicky Gumbel of the Alpha Course points out a bit of satire that came to his attention in the

British Press. He says:

There was an article in "Private Eye" which was headed: 'God to leave Church of England'. What it said was this: 'Following the example set by leading former Anglicans, God has indicated that he too is to leave the Church of England. Friends of God believe the issue of women priests to have been behind the Almighty's sudden decision to convert to Rome. According to sources close to God, he's been unhappy for some time with the direction the Anglican Church has been taking and has now finally had enough. A Church of England spokesman said: 'Losing God is a bit of a blow, but it's just something we're going to have to learn to live with.'

This would be a good description of the church at Laodicea — for them God was important but not actually necessary. No wonder their worship lacked passion!

But Christ provides them with an accurate appraisal of their situation (17b). Though they were a center for banking Christ says, "You are poor." They were a textile town but Christ says, "You have no clothes." They had a famous medical school that specialized in a salve for treating ailments of the eye but Christ says, "You are blind."

The three figures of gold, clothes, and salve all point to the need for authentic salvation through Christ. Our poverty of spirit can only be overcome by receiving the gold of heaven procured by Christ's sufferings. The shame of our moral nakedness can only be covered by the clothes of the naked Christ on the cross. The blindness of falsehood can only be healed by the salve of Christ's truth. So where do we find the gold, the clothes and the salve?

We do not have to go far. But, like many other things in life, sometimes the answer is so close we miss it. In the TV sitcom, "Taxi", Christopher Lloyd's character "Jim" is taking a written driving test and needs help. He sees Bobby and whispers to him, "Pssst. What does a yellow light mean?" Bobby replies, "Slow down." Jim says, "Okay. What...does...a...yellow...light...mean?" Bobby says more emphatically, "Slow down!" Jim, who is becoming increasingly befuddled, says, "Okay. Whaaat...doooees...aaa...yeel-loow...liiight...meeeeaan?"

Sometimes the answer is so close we miss it. The answer to the quest for authentic salvation is closer than our breath. Do not miss it. Christ offers it here and now.

He created you. He is watching over you. Even when you did not know it, he was showing love to you. And he wants you to love him passionately in return.

2. REFRESH A TEPID DISCIPLESHIP

Christ says:

"I wish you were cold or hot"(15).

Hot water is useful for bathing. Cold water is desirable for drinking. Lukewarm water is not so useful, not so desirable. But Christ is not talking about water but about those who follow him. If we are going to grow in our relationship with the Lord we need to heat up our

worship and we need to REFRESH our DISCIPLESHIP.

Laodicea had another sister city called Colossae. It was noted for its refreshing, cold, mountain stream water. The implication being that this also needs to be a characteristic of our discipleship. How we live out our faith needs to be as refreshing and invigorating as the famous cold waters of Colossae. But in Laodicea the water was tepid and so was their discipleship. Christ says:

“I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent”
(19).

No one likes to be disciplined. No one likes to be corrected. No one even likes to admit a mistake let alone make the effort to put it right.

But God is not a sadist. He does not sit up in heaven saying to himself, “How can I make their lives miserable today?” Rather, God loves us. He has a plan for us. The Bible says:

"From the very beginning God decided that those who came to Him - and He knew who would - should become like His Son..." (Rom 8:29 LB).

But in order to become like Jesus it is necessary for us to repent. This is an older word, some would say an old-fashioned word. But whatever you call it, we still need to experience it. Repentance is not simply a change of opinion or just saying you're sorry. A lot of people are sorry – sorry they got caught! But repentance also means wanting to change the way you think and act about something you know is wrong.

The process of learning to become like Jesus is called discipleship. It involves both a turning from evil and turning toward God. God can help us become like Jesus and we cannot become like Jesus without God's help. But God also wants us to cooperate with him in this endeavor. A disciple is a kind of student who learns by experience and with consistency.

Learning by experience means we are not content with having mere head knowledge about Jesus but we also want to live out what he has taught us. We want to experience him in the here and now.

We also need to learn with consistency. Anyone can be prayerful, loving and devoted for a short time. But Christ calls us to be consistent in the way we follow him.

The athletes who compete at the Olympic Games do not get there by talent alone. It requires discipline, that is, training with consistency. They train in all kinds of weather, when their muscles are wracked with pain, and whether they are “in the mood” or not. Consistency builds discipline and discipline yields effectiveness. So it is with those who follow Christ. Consistency builds discipline and discipline yields spiritual effectiveness.

None of us will be perfect at this in this life. We will make mistakes. We will get distracted. We will from time-to-time stumble and fall down. But the Good News is, if we turn to God in such circumstances he will forgive us and restore us. In this way our relationship is refreshed again and again.

3. ENRICH A MEAGER FELLOWSHIP

If we are going to grow in our relationship with the Lord we also need to ENRICH our FELLOWSHIP.

The church at Laodicea had an insipid fellowship. The problem may have been that many who were associated with the church had not yet experienced real fellowship with the Lord. They may have known some things about Christ but had never actually received Christ. So Christ offers this invitation:

“Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (20).

This verse is often quoted in situations where the aim is to encourage those who are unchurched to come forward and give their lives to Christ. Now there is nothing wrong with that. But I want you to note the original context. The invitation is extended to those who are in the church, to those who may attend church but do not yet experience real fellowship because they have not yet received Christ into their lives. Perhaps this describes you. If so, you must understand that the door to real fellowship with the Lord is closed. It is closed on your side. You need to be the one who opens the door. If Christ is knocking at the door of your heart, let him in! (See also John 1:12.)

The imagery behind Revelation 3:20 is that of a meal. Like us, the ancient Greeks had three meals in a day. For breakfast they grabbed a piece of bread, dipped it in something, and ran out the door. Not much has changed in 2,000 years except today we might grab a Krispy Kreme or a Pop Tart. Lunch was like our Brown Bag and came in the middle of the day. They would sit down somewhere and eat whatever food they had brought with them. When finished they went back to work. But the evening meal was different. It was leisurely. It was unhurried. It was savored. It was the time to linger in company with family and friends.

The question is, which meal does Christ use to symbolize the kind of fellowship he wants with us? “Only got a minute breakfast?” “Catch as catch can lunch?” Or “I want to savor your company supper?” The answer, obviously, is the last one. Christ wants us to linger in loving fellowship with him and savor his company. The closer we get to him, the closer we are to each other, and our fellowship is enriched.

CONCLUSION

The Seven Letters of the Book of Revelation tell us about LOVE, SUFFERING, WITNESS, MISSION, WATCHING, POWER, and DEVOTION. But most of all they tell us about CHRIST and how to serve him in the world. The letter to the church at Laodicea ends like all the others:

“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (22).

This reminds us that the seven churches represent all churches. The situations are local and temporary and I hope I have shown that by recognizing the local context we can better understand the meaning of each letter. But the message of the letters is eternal. And through these letters the Spirit still speaks to us today. Are we listening?