

Not Fit for Consumption

In the name of the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of God's creation, dear friends in Christ: In our Lenten devotions this year we've been examining the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor that the Lord Jesus dictated to St. John who was at the time in exile on the island of Patmos. At the very beginning of this set of letters, when Jesus begins to speak to St. John, he appears in glory with light like the sun radiating from his face. And he is standing in the center of seven golden lampstands, which, we are told, represent the seven churches aflame with the fire of his Holy Spirit. It's a lovely vision of Jesus present in the midst of all his congregations of faithful people, and how he is watching over the affairs of his churches. Really, that's what the letters are all about, as Jesus stands among his churches pointing out what's good and what's bad, what needs to be reinforced and what needs to be fixed in each one. For a few of the churches it's just a little fine-tuning that's required to get them up and running properly, for others nothing short of a major overhaul will do the job.

Our Lenten wreath here makes a nice symbolic representation of that whole image; what with the Christ candle in the center and the others encircling it. We use it as something of a timepiece for counting down the Sundays of Lent, but it also pictures how the Lord Jesus is present among his churches even today, and how congregations such as our own continue to hear his words of encouragement and correction. And yes, we are one candle short to complete the picture; but still it's close.

And maybe it's just as well for the illustration that there are only six candles in the ring, because the church we're examining this evening, the one at Laodicea, hardly ranks a place with the others. Our dear mothers taught us, "If you can't say something nice about someone, it's best to say nothing at all." If the Lord Jesus had followed that rule, there would be no seventh letter to the church at Laodicea, because Jesus can find nothing good to say about it. For this congregation it's all judgment and warning.

Laodicea was about fifty miles due east of Ephesus. It was a major trade and banking center in the region called Phrygia. It was a wealthy town. Besides its thriving commerce in all the regular commodities, Laodicea was famous for the fine black wool raised in the surrounding hills and fabrics made of the same. Even more highly sought were some medicines produced there, especially an ointment for the eyes that helped cure pinkeye and other infections. These exports kept cash flowing in. And with various currencies from all over the world pouring in, it was a logical place to build a mint where standard gold, silver, and copper coins could be produced – so they did. The city became a money exchange center. And since there was always a lot of wealth in high quality coinage in town, where do you suppose folks would go for loans to fund business ventures? Laodicea was the Wall Street of first century Asia.

It was also a city full of temples to various gods, each one lavishly decked out in marble and precious metals. The citizens of Laodicea donated vast sums to thank their deities for their prosperity – and, of course, in hopes of buying their gods' continued favor. We also know that there was a large Jewish minority in the city, and that the cult of the Roman emperors was popular here. In other places that combination usually spelled trouble for the Christians in the form of violent persecution; but not so much in Laodicea. The reason, it seems likely, is that in Laodicea the citizens were generally comfortable financially. They were more interested in making money than in controversies about religion. Apparently also a good portion of the

Christians themselves were fairly well off, which is different than most places where the congregations were made up mostly of slaves, ex-slaves, servants, and the poor. In a lot of places, Christians were looked down on not just because of their faith, but also because of their social status. Christianity was seen as a religion for losers. That wasn't as true at Laodicea. There if you were a pagan or a Jew, your next-door neighbor or business partner might have been a Christian. The general attitude seems to have been, "Hey, if he's helping me make money, who cares what he believes?"

So all in all, the church at Laodicea had a lot of advantages over the others we've heard about: peace, prosperity, little or no persecution – the ideal conditions that every church hopes for. Yet despite their advantages, Jesus critiques them as the worst of the seven. What was so terrible about them? Were they confusing the Gospel message, denying Christ, or teaching soul-destroying heresies? No. Were they especially wicked people: thieves, murderers, or dishonest in their business dealings? No. What then? Were they engaged in idolatry, witchcraft, or sexual immorality? No, nothing like that. Well, maybe they were lacking in works of charity and love that flow from the Gospel? Now that's possible – I expect every church could make improvements there; but that isn't what Jesus condemns them for. No, it's for something he considers far more offensive and destructive to his church. He tells them that their fatal flaw is that they are *lukewarm*, being neither hot nor cold. For *that*, he says, he's about to spit them out of his mouth like wine soured into vinegar.

Wait. Lukewarm? *That's it?* Why's *that* so objectionable to the Lord?" It's even more puzzling when you consider that he says it would be better for them to be either hot or cold. Assuming that he's using temperature as a measure of devotion and relative faithfulness, we can understand how being "hot" would be a good thing. It would mean they were on fire for the Lord: eagerly getting into God's Word, worshipping together, full of the fruits of the Spirit, fellowshiping, and spreading the Gospel. But why would he prefer a *cold* church to one that is at least lukewarm? Wouldn't it be better to be partially "on fire" than not at all? —Halfway faithful and devoted, than zero percent?

Human logic would say yes; but that's not the way the Lord sees it. And when you consider how it is that he operates in the world, it's not difficult to understand why. Recall that the Lord comes to us in his Word. First he uses his holy Law to reveal our sin and its deadly consequences. When we hear what God's perfect standards are, we see where we stand before him. We realize the trouble we're in. By the power of his Spirit, the Law drives us to Godly fear, sorrow for sin, and repentance.

Then, when we realize our peril, he applies the Word of the Gospel. The Gospel tells us how God's own Son in love came into the world to be born a man, our Lord Jesus, and how he became the sacrifice of atonement for our sins. He took the curse and penalty of our offenses, and was condemned by his Father in our place when he suffered and died on the cross. He endured the fury of hell and God's damnation that should have been ours. In fact, because he was both God and man on that cross, he suffered *infinitely*, absorbing in himself – in his body and spirit – a sentence far surpassing what would be the equivalent combined suffering of an eternity in hell for every human being who ever lived. When *that* penalty was paid, he said, "It is finished", bowed his head and died. But three days later he rose from the dead, proving that with the just penalty of mankind's sin satisfied, death no longer could hold him. And he began to proclaim his powerful Gospel message: that by trusting in him and his full self-sacrifice for our sin, death and all of sin's eternal consequences can no longer hold us.

Together then, God's Word to us of Law and Gospel make and keep us believers: the Law brings us to the point of death with the fear of damnation, and the Gospel communicates to us the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ who died and rose for us. They are two extreme opposites that must work together and be maintained in tension, because the moment I stop fearing God's terrible wrath against my sin, I begin to loosen my grip of trust on the sacrifice Christ made for me. This is why a cold church is better than a lukewarm one. In a cold church you have only unbelievers. Faith is dead. The members are in a state of full-blown rebellion. Thus they are the perfect targets for God's Law. Recall that during his ministry on earth, Jesus had most success among the people who were the worst: sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors, and so on. Why? Because they knew they were sinners. When they heard the Law, they trembled. They rightly feared the wrath of God. They knew they were sick and needed a doctor. Or to use the metaphor of hot and cold, they realized they were freezing to death, and so they were drawn close to the fire of Christ to keep warm.

Ah, but in a lukewarm church there's always *just enough* comfortable warmth of the Gospel there to take the bitter fury out of the Law's icy winds before they hit the human heart. It never gets quite so cold that you feel the need to reach for the blanket. So, when people hear the Law's demands, that God calls his people to be holy and perfect and sinless, and that he wants our good works to shine in this dark world, rather than tremble before the righteous decrees of God, people think, "Oh please, don't give me that. *God loves me. Christ died for me.* I don't have to worry about that stuff." What's bred is a general attitude of indifference or complacency. Souls are lulled into a self-contented slumber – which, as you know, is fertile soil for the plans and schemes of Satan. And he is merciless in his attack.

First, because there's no fear of God's Law, people are led increasingly to push the envelope of acceptable behavior. If every sin is forgiven, why worry about them? Soon the church stops calling them sins. What was a scandal yesterday merely makes us a little uncomfortable today; and by tomorrow it will be business as usual – and you see this happening in the church today with such things as divorce and remarriage, abortion, homosexuality, and who knows what's going to be next. The church sinks deeper into immoral behavior, all the while claiming, "It's okay now. We're forgiven."

Second, because the Law no longer terrifies people, they lose the relevance of the cross and passion of the Lord Jesus. Where there is no feeling of guilt, there's no need for atonement. So God's infinite love for a lost world expressed in the agonized suffering of his Son as a sacrifice for our sin, becomes watered down into a general mushy feeling of divine benevolence: "Smile! Be happy! God loves you!" – True statements, to be sure; but poor comfort indeed to someone facing one of life's tragedies or *death*. Then a God who gives you warm-fuzzies isn't much help; lost is the real power of the cross and shed blood of the Savior.

Third, in the lukewarm church there is no appetite for growth in the faith. Why should there be? "Now that I've got Jesus, I've got all I need." That's exactly what the people at Laodicea were saying: "I am rich. I have prospered. And I need nothing." They were speaking of their spiritual condition. The irony is that with respect to material wealth, no one ever says that. Who's ever heard of a rich person who didn't want more money? Yet when it comes to spiritual wealth that the Lord generously pours out upon us in his Word and Sacraments, people have exactly the opposite mentality. "Don't I have enough *yet*? What's the absolute minimum required to get by? How little can I get away with? Oh, and don't bother me with doctrines, creeds, theology, and all those depressing Old Testament stories; I've got Jesus!"

That attitude, the Lord says, is indicative of the lukewarm church (or the lukewarm Christian). And people in the lukewarm church are like milk: they could be used for something if they were cold in the fridge or hot on the stove. Either way, they could be preserved. But the lukewarm have been sitting on the counter at room temperature, and they've gone sour. Now they're not fit for consumption and the Lord says he will spit them out. And they do not realize it. Jesus says, "You *think* you're rich, and do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." This is why being lukewarm is so dangerous to the church. Those who suffer from it think they're going along fine and dandy. They don't see their peril. They are looking forward to the day of the Lord. They don't realize that for them it will be a day of darkness, not light.

That's why the Lord's words to the lukewarm are especially harsh. He's got to be forceful to shake them out of their complacency. He doesn't do it to be mean, but rather he rebukes and disciplines those he loves precisely so that they won't be lost. He says, "I stand at the door and knock." It's a touching picture of the Lord eagerly reaching out – especially to the lukewarm – but take note that it's the door of the church he's knocking on. The lukewarm church has effectively put Jesus out. He's trying to get back in. And to the extent that we are lukewarm, he's knocking on our door.

He wants to enrich us with the pure gold of his whole Word. He wants to bring us to proper repentance so that he can show us the priceless salvation he paid for so dearly with his blood, sweat, and anguish. He wants to cover the naked shame of our sins with the glorious white robe of his righteousness. And he wants to anoint our eyes with his healing salve so that we will see the truth, and so that we will keep answering the door and inviting him in to feast with us every day. Then, filled with his Spirit, we will glow hot with the fire of his love.

To those who keep answering the door and who thus overcome, he promises the privilege of sitting with him on his throne at the right hand of his Father. So may he give us the grace to welcome him every day. And may he give us attentive ears to hear what the Spirit says to the all the seven churches. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!