

“Opening the Door to Jesus Christ”

Revelation 3:14-22

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Text Comment

v.16 There are two significantly different interpretations of the statement that the Laodicean Christians were neither hot nor cold. Laodicea was well known for its lukewarm, bad-tasting water. It had to be piped in because there was no natural supply at the town site, located as it was at the junction of several roads, not by a river or spring. Some of the pipes through which the water was brought to the city are still in existence today and the high mineral content of the water is indicated by the thick deposits on the interior of the pipes. Laodicea also sat between two nearby towns in the same valley both easily visible in either direction. Hierapolis was famous for its hot springs and Colosse was famous for the cool refreshing water that tumbled off the snow-capped mountain at whose foot Colosse sat. In the traditional interpretation of the hot and the cold the reference to Laodicean lukewarmness is to the fact that the believers in Laodicea lacked spiritual fervor. It would be better for them to be either hot or cold. Even active opposition is better than lethargic indifference. The statement thus taken is an indictment of their lack of zeal. The two objections to that interpretation are now, however, widely considered to be almost insurmountable. The first is that it is difficult to find in ancient sources, much less biblical ones, the use of any of these terms – lukewarm, hot, or cold – to refer to *persons* and second because it is hard to know why “cold” would be preferable to “lukewarm” as an indication of a person’s spiritual temperature. If cold, lukewarm, and hot are measures of spiritual interest, presumably lukewarm would be preferable to cold.

The other interpretation now favored in most of the commentaries is based on the fact that both the hot water of Hierapolis – thought to have healing properties and water which made the public baths of the city famous throughout the Greco-Roman world – and the cold water of Colosse, so refreshing, I say both of those waters *are useful*. They *do* what water ought to do. But the water in Laodicea neither tastes good in drinking nor is hot enough for the baths or to be a healing agent. It is the kind of water one spits out of his mouth, both for its taste and its temperature. In this interpretation it is not the spiritual enthusiasm of the Laodicean Christians that is being described by the term “lukewarm” but the quality of their work as Christians. It is ineffective, unproductive. These Christians were not denying the faith but they weren’t *doing* anything on its behalf either. They were useless to the cause.

I have preached on this text before and took the reference to the Laodiceans being lukewarm as a condemnation of their half-heartedness, their lack of zeal. I am now persuaded that that interpretation is not as likely as the newer one that takes their lukewarmness as an indictment of their ineffectiveness, perhaps especially their ineffective *witness*. Unbelievers were receiving neither spiritual healing nor the refreshment of new life through the Laodiceans. [Beale, 303] That it is their witness that

is in view may also be inferred from the identification of Jesus at the beginning of the letter as the “faithful and true *witness*” in v. 14.

The difference between the two interpretations is, of course, not that great. Precisely *how* they were ineffective or useless in their witness or otherwise is not explicitly said. They were likely ineffective for the same reasons Christians are always ineffective: either because they were so self-satisfied that they didn’t care to work hard at Christian ministry or because the words they spoke on behalf of Christ were compromised by the worldliness of their lives.

v.17 Laodicea was an unusually wealthy city. Its financial independence was a matter of local pride so much so that Laodicea, in an act we can hardly conceive of in the early twenty-first century, actually refused the customary imperial financial aid that was offered to repair the damage caused by an earthquake in A.D. 60. [Tacitus, *Annals*, XIV, xxvii]. The church apparently had imbibed a full measure of this same self-sufficient spirit. It is quite possible, of course, that the Christians’ financial prosperity resulted from the compromises they had made with the idolatry of the local trade guilds. In other words they hadn’t let their Christian faith interfere with making money! The Smyrna church, as we read in 2:9 was financially poor but spiritually rich. The Laodicean church was the exact reverse: financially rich but spiritually poor.

v.18 This verse presumes an exact knowledge of Laodicea at the end of the first century. It was a financial center; it was famous for its textile industry, and for its medical school which was famous, among other things, for an eye salve made out of a local powder. The Laodiceans were thinking too much of what their city could give them and too little of what Christ and only Christ could give them. The cure for what ailed them could not be found in more of what their society offered them!

The verse also suggests again that the problem with their witness and the reason for their ineffectiveness was compromise with the world. The gold needs to be refined of its impurities, the clothes need to be white – unlike the soiled clothes of 3:4, soiled by compromise with the world – and the lack of spiritual discernment needs to be overcome.

v.19 The situation is serious, but not beyond repair.

v.20 Because elsewhere in the New Testament the image of Christ standing at the door is a metaphor of the Second Coming this statement has been taken by many to be the equivalent of a promise that the Lord would return soon, such a promise as we have emphatically at the end of Revelation in 22:7, 12, and 20, “Behold, I am coming soon.” The promise of eating with the Lord at the eschatological banquet, the marriage supper of the Lamb is also an image of the consummation of history elsewhere in the NT and later in the book of Revelation. But in the context of this letter the Second Coming does not seem to be the point. The statement seems rather to refer to a promise of communion *right now* with individual believers who will repent of their sins and turn to the Lord in new faith, new obedience and new service. One important evidence of that is that the appeal in v. 20 is to the individual believer. The verbs and pronouns are all singular. The

reference does not seem to be to the whole church at the time of the consummation. In any case, in context, as verse 19 indicates, the summons here is for people who are already Christians to be renewed in their fellowship with the Lord. What they had they had lost and they need to get it back.

In the ancient world sharing a meal had greater significance than it does today. It was a symbol of affection and acceptance. Remember in the Gospels that Jesus was criticized by the Pharisees for not only associating with tax collectors and sinners but eating with them (Luke 15:2). Later, Peter was criticized by the Jerusalem Christians not for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles – they were okay with that – the problem was that he also ate with them (Acts 11:3). [Ladd, 68] Eating with Gentiles or tax collectors was getting *too* close, going *too* far!

Today is Reformation Sunday, the Sunday on which we commemorate the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century; the commemoration of the recovery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel that had been largely lost in the church herself. The Reformation was both an intellectual/doctrinal movement – a recovery of the authority of the Bible and of its central teaching of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ – and a spiritual movement, what we are nowadays wont to call a revival. People did not simply begin to think differently about what it meant to be a Christian, in large numbers they embraced the faith for the very first time for themselves, and their hearts were transformed by the love of God and the presence of Christ through his Spirit. People who had thought themselves Christians all their lives began to live in very different ways in immense numbers all over Europe.

What the Reformation demonstrated in an epoch-making way was that the church is capable of losing a grip on her faith. Times without number real faith and real Christian experience and real loving service to God has ebbed and, though the church continues to maintain its confession and though it continues to say the old words in its worship, the light has dimmed nearly to the point of going out altogether.

American evangelical Christians often do not take this prospect as seriously as they should because they have been taught to think of only evangelical Christians like themselves as actually belonging to the church. Their doctrine of the church is that only real believers count and real believers are believers like themselves. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, liberal Protestants, for example, don't count. And so, while there may be in any congregation the odd hypocrite, the church herself, in their view, is still almost entirely full of life. But not only is that not a biblical view of the church, it mistakes the history of the church. The worst version of Roman Catholicism was, at one time, a vital evangelicalism. The most liberal, secular Protestantism was once living, gospel preaching, Bible-believing Christianity. And, of course, in the Roman Church, in Orthodoxy, and in the liberal Protestant churches are still considerable numbers of real believers who are loving and serving the Lord Jesus as authentic Christians will and do.

So Laodicea and its ineffective Christianity—its useless, self-satisfied going through the motions form of Christianity—is a message of immediate relevance to every part and every age and every condition of Christendom. The summons of this letter is a summons to be heard and answered by every Christian over and over again and by every Christian church. Indeed, another link with the

Reformation is provided here in v. 19 and its call to repentance. If you remember, the very first of Luther's *95 Theses*, the publication of which is regarded as the opening salvo of the Protestant Reformation, reads:

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

Repentance, like the faith from which it springs, is not something done once and for all at the beginning of one's Christian life. That is apparently what the Laodicean Christians were thinking. They had believed and repented and had become Christians. Their relationship with God had been taken care of and, whether they ever would have put it this way to themselves, they seemed to think that now that faith and repentance were behind them they could live largely as any other inhabitant of Laodicea.

But repentance, as the Bible teaches us everywhere and as we are reminded here in Revelation 3:19, is to be rather the habit and the daily characteristic of a Christian's life, not something done once and never again. There will be the need for repentance over and over again; indeed every day, though, as here, there will be a special need for a Christian's renewal of repentance in certain times and in certain places of his or her Christian life.

We have said before that there is nothing in this letter, nothing in any of the seven letters of chapters 2 and 3, that cannot be applied to the church at any time, anywhere, or to any individual Christian. These churches represent us all. There are times when true churches and true Christians are more like Smyrna and times when they are more like Laodicea. There are churches that began as Smyrna and ended as Laodicea. And there are times in almost any Christian's life when he or she has slipped into Laodicean ineffectiveness and has to be roused by the Lord's summons to repent so that he or she can again enjoy table fellowship with the Lord Jesus. This letter is a summons to each one of us – hence the singular imperatives of v. 19 and the singular pronouns and verbs in v. 20 – and to all of us together to be sure that we are living in repentance and so in communion with Jesus Christ. It is all too possible not to do so.

John Duncan, the inimitable “rabbi” Duncan of 19th century Scottish Presbyterianism, the John Duncan I quote to you so often, before he was a professor of Hebrew at the New College in Edinburgh he was a missionary to Jews in Hungary. Alfred Edersheim, one of the 19th century's great biblical scholars, was a Jewish Christian convert of Duncan's in Budapest. Reflecting on his many conversations with Jews about the Christian faith, Duncan once remarked, “Jews who have read the New Testament have often said to me, ‘It is all very good, but Christians do not believe it themselves – why should Jews?’” [*Just a Talker*, 100]

There were a great many Jews in Laodicea we know from the records of that period. And apparently they asked a similar question. The Christians don't take their own faith seriously, why should we? These Christians in Laodicea don't take it seriously when the New Testament speaks of followers of Christ seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, of laying their treasures up in heaven, of keeping themselves unstained by the world, of counting everything loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. They seem to be as eager to get rich as anyone else in town. They seem to be as worried about accumulating things

as any Jew or pagan. They seem to take as much satisfaction and find as much pride in the things for which Laodicea is famous as any other inhabitant of the town. The Christian faith doesn't seem to make all that much difference to them; why should *we* embrace it? And, in particular, the Christians talk on and on about knowing Jesus Christ, about his being present by the Holy Spirit, about walking with the Lord and so on. They seem to say that they have knowledge of God and communion with God that neither the Jews nor the Gentile practitioners of other faiths have ever experienced. Well, if so, why does that not make more of a difference; why don't they live their lives in a more obviously different way than we live ours? Does knowing God at last mean so little?

Real Christians blanch to hear unbelievers ask such questions precisely because we all know all too well how much and how often we have contributed to that impression that unbelievers get about us. We ourselves can chuckle about someone who is confidently predicting the end of the world any day but still carefully keeps his life insurance current and takes a great interest in the performance of the portfolio that makes up his 401K. But it is demoralizing to us to think that we are like that ourselves in still more serious ways. We sing "Amazing Grace" but don't seem to be all that amazed. We talk about heaven but don't seem to want to go there. We confidently assert that this world is not our home but seem to be putting down roots like everyone else. We talk about our dependence upon the Lord Jesus but seem to be counting on the same things our unbelieving friends count on for *their* happiness and prosperity.

What we have lost in such times is a distinctly Christian perspective. And, as we are reminded here, that perspective takes root and finds its beginning in sin and shame. It is one of the great scandals of our faith, one of the reasons for its unpopularity in so many circles in our culture. In the 18th century, Lady Huntington, the friend and patron of the preachers of the Great Awakening, especially Whitefield and the Wesleys, once invited a duchess friend of hers to hear George Whitefield preach. The duchess was not amused. "It is monstrous," she said, "to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth; it is highly offensive and insulting." And most people think pretty much as she did.

But the Christian faith takes its point of departure in our badness, in the corruption of our hearts, and in the manifold ways in which we live a disreputable life. All of this had been slowly but surely forgotten by the Laodicean Christians, as it is forgotten by us to some degree almost every day that we live; so unwelcome a thought as it is, so unpleasant to remember. These people, Christians though they claimed to be, had forgotten the first thing about themselves, that they were in themselves and by themselves wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked; that there was that about them that was genuinely and profoundly *shameful*.

Alexander Whyte once remarked that he wished to be known as an expert on sin and he was one of the great experts in all the church's history on the sinfulness of the human heart. Here he is, in his study of this seventh of the letters to the churches of Asia Minor, discussing the "shameful nakedness" of the Laodicean Christians.

"There is nothing that is more terrible to the heart of man than shame. Shame and contempt are far worse to face than death itself. When we speak of shame, in our shallow and superficial way we usually think of the shame of a naked body. But there is no real

shame in that. When the Bible speaks of shame it is always of the infinitely more terrible shame of a naked soul. Take away the terrible shame of a naked soul and there is no shame at all in the nakedness of the body. But once strip a soul naked, and death is the only refuge and hell its only hiding-place. Take it home to yourselves and see. Suppose your innermost soul laid absolutely bare to us who are your friends and neighbors. Suppose your most secret thoughts about us told, and all your secret hatred of us, and all your envy of this man and that man, naming him.... Suppose it, if you dare for one moment to suppose it, the whole bottomless pit of your evil heart laid bare.” [*Bible Characters*, 478]

That’s shame and we all of us have it. This culture is doing it’s very best to remove shame from the human heart. It is telling us that what we have always thought wrong and disgusting and unworthy and disreputable in our life and in our behavior is, in fact, entirely normal; nothing to worry about. And it is urging us to forget the negative in any case and accent the positive. You may be selfish and greedy and small-minded in many ways, you may live for yourself in almost every way; your thoughts, hidden as they are, may be in more ways that you are willing to admit an open sewer, *but* things are not so bad: you gave a little money to a charity, you don’t spank your children, and you don’t condemn homosexual sex. But it will not work. Men and women cannot escape their shame because they cannot escape the faculty of moral judgment that God placed in their soul. Even if, in their pride, self-satisfaction, and lack of honesty and moral discernment they do everything they can to excuse themselves for almost everything they do and fail to do, they cannot entirely cover up their shame; and, what is more, they condemn others for the same failures of which they are guilty and others condemn them and deep in their hearts they know it.

Still the effort to escape shame is being made with might and main. It is my greatest worry about the present generation that they will not see Jesus Christ in the majesty of his love as the Savior of sinners because they will not see themselves as sinners. That unwillingness, that dishonesty blinds a man or woman to the most important truth of all. It is a fixed law in God’s cosmos – a law for non-Christians and Christians alike – that a person cannot think highly of himself or herself and highly of Christ at the same time. If Christ is treasured in a person’s heart and honored in his or her life, it will be chiefly as the Savior of sinners that he is honored. And they will love him and treasure their knowledge of him, therefore, only to the extent they recognize their deep need for what he alone can give them and their daily dependence upon him for more of the same. Minimize your sins, congratulate yourselves on your virtues and your strengths – which we all find ourselves absurdly doing much more than we want to admit – and you will not, you simply will not, treasure the Lord Jesus and his fellowship as will the man or woman who knows how great a debt he or she owes to Jesus’ love. I swear to you that Jesus Christ has never once in all of human history given the prize of intimate fellowship with himself to a self-satisfied, self-righteous person, whatever his or her profession may have been. No wonder Augustine should have written: “the beginning of intelligence is to know yourself and to know yourself a sinner.” It is that knowledge, the repentance that flows from it, and the desire for the cleansing from shame and the help to overcome your shame that only Jesus can give you.

What does it mean for Jesus to come in and dine with us? It is a metaphor but a metaphor for what? To one degree or another it is like this. John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*,

tells us that one day he was walking alone, depressed and discouraged by the thought of his sins, his moral failure. He was altogether too aware of his shame. It was ten or eleven in the morning, he says and he was walking beside a hedge. The details of the moment obviously stuck in his memory!

“As I was walking...suddenly this bolted in upon me – the blood of Christ remits all guilt. ...this word took hold of me – the blood of Jesus Christ...cleanseth us from all sin. [Suddenly] I felt my soul greatly to love...Jesus Christ... For I saw that he was still my Friend, and one who did reward me good for evil. Till I felt so to Him that if I had had a thousand gallons of blood in my veins I could then freely have spilt it all at the feet of my Lord and Savior. There was nothing now but Christ before my eyes.... Now Christ was my all.”

It was the acknowledgement of his shame that opened the door and Christ came in and they had that ecstatic experience of fellowship with one another. It is the promise of that love and that joy in fellowship with Jesus who is the living God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and the Judge of all mankind, it is love and joy in fellowship *with him* as expressed there in v. 20, that ought to make all of us determined to open that door every single day that we live. To open it by an honest confession of our sin and shame and by a sincere repentance and turning away from our sins in Jesus’ name. That is how you open the door so that Jesus might come in. And compared to *his coming in* and eating and dining with you no amount of gold, not the most stylish clothing, no perfect human eyesight is worthy to be compared!

It is Reformation Sunday. There are many stories of true faith and faithfulness that come from the history of the Reformation. Aonio Paleario was a Roman priest, a priest in a church and a city very much like Laodicea. It was very self-satisfied but was doing very little useful work in the kingdom of God. It was not healing the spiritually sick; it was not bringing the water of life to the spiritually thirsty. Paleario became convinced of the fundamental rightness of the criticism that was being made of the church in his day, of its ways, and of its misunderstanding of the way of salvation. And he sought to be a faithful witness to his time and to the people of the church of his day. He wrote a book called *The Benefit of Christ’s Death*. It was his witness to others concerning Jesus and salvation. Paleario wanted to be useful. He wanted to tell others what he had learned of Jesus Christ. But the book was destroyed by his church and its contents were unknown until a copy was found in the library of Oxford University in the 19th century and the book reprinted. In that book Jesus Christ was set forth as everything in the salvation of sinners. Paleario was hot *and* cold: a faithful witness!

Paleario remained in the Roman church, but for his devotion to Jesus Christ and in a pique of anti-Reformation vengeance he was, though now an old man, arrested and tried for heresy. The judge asked him to state what are the first, the second, and the third causes of salvation. In those days the typical Roman Catholic answer would have been Christ, the first cause, the gospel, the second cause, and the church, the third cause. They wanted Paleario to say publicly that one must hold to the church, by which they meant the Roman church with all of its practices and rites, to be saved. But Paleario was no Laodicean Christian. He was not willing to compromise his loyalty to Christ to gain a standing among his peers. He was not willing to blunt his witness. He did not prefer Laodicea to heaven. He would not bite his tongue to save his skin. He answered

that the first cause of his salvation was Jesus Christ; the second cause was Jesus Christ; and the third cause was Jesus Christ. And for that answer a Christian church put him to death. And for that answer and his willingness to stand up for his Savior he now stands clothed in white and will someday sit down with Christ on the throne of God.

Where do such passion and loyalty and service come from, the passion, loyalty and service to which every Christian ought to be daily aspiring? It comes from the heartfelt acknowledgement that Jesus Christ lifted off of me the mountainous weight of my sins and my shame before God and man. What no one else could have done; he did at terrible cost to himself. And that conviction makes us not only willing servants of Jesus and his faithful witnesses, but those who prize nothing so much as fellowship with him!