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Series: *Body-Building Lessons from the Seven Churches*

Title: *Laodicea*

Text: Revelation 3:14-22

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About 15 or so years ago, we sent a team of Redlanders on a mission trip to a place called War, West Virginia. If you're wondering about the name "WAR," I did too and after asking several people who didn't know the origin of the name, an older resident said it got the name from a war that was fought with the Native Americans.

Well, even though War is in the good ole U.S. of A. that week it felt like we were in a third world country. I mean, the poverty there was as bad as it was in the DR. Plus, you could not drink the water that came out of the tap because, people flushed their toilets right into the river where the drinking water came from. You could see the pipes coming out from the houses.

War was coal country, in fact it was the area where the ROCKET BOYS lived. Remember the movie "October Sky?" But the coal industry was long gone and in its wake were people with no source of income other than welfare.

Here's something else about that trip. We slept and ate in an old abandoned middle school and we drove many miles to the places we were ministering--places where we were painting houses and doing backyard Bible clubs. Those "many miles" involved 122 turns on mountain roads---back and forth---back and forth. I counted.

All those turns in our 15-passenger vans---made everyone carsick---especially on the day we took a huge earth ball for the kids to play with---because it filled the front of the van and the people in the back could not see the road. There was a CVS in town and I think we bought their entire inventory of Dramamine. In short, those were seven nauseating days. We were car sick in the morning on the way to our work sites and car sick in the evening on our way back to that school.

Is anyone here prone to carsickness? How about seasickness? Do long boat rides make you sick? If not, then perhaps there's something ELSE in life that makes your stomach turn—like: the smell of a particular food or the scent of someone else's child's diaper. Maybe listening to sermons makes you sick. If so, I hope you've got an aisle seat!

Now, this particular malady is understandable in you and me. After all we are only frail humans. As Psalm 103 says, ***"We are but dust. Our days are like grass, we flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more."*** I mean, we expect PEOPLE to get sick—that's part of what it means to be a "people." But God on the other hand—surely God has never experienced nausea---because after all, He is God and that's part of what it means to be God.

Right?

Well, our text for today SUGGESTS that is not exactly true. Before you label me a heretic, let me state that of course our Almighty Heavenly Father does not get weak. He is indeed ALL-mighty ALL the time—but the Bible does say that there is ONE thing makes Him at least FEEL like being sick. And I'm referring something our Lord said in His letter to the last of the seven churches of Revelation---the church in Laodicea---for the behavior, the attitudes and actions—of the believers in this last church did indeed make God feel sick.

But before we read the TEXT of this last letter—let me set up the CONtext for you. Laodicea was located about 43 miles east of Philadelphia and it would have been the final stop on this first century mailman's postal route. All he'd have to do after delivering this seventh letter is walk 100 miles due west to Ephesus and grab the next ferryboat to Patmos and he'd be back where he started.

Let's review his route ONE MORE TIME:

“From Patmos to Ephesus, Ephesus to Smyrna, Smyrna to Pergamum, Purgamum to Thyatira, Thyatira to Sardis, Sardis to Philadelphia---and from Philadelphia to Laodicea.”

Finally done! The mailbag is empty!

Now by reading Paul’s letter to the church at Colossae we can learn several things about this church in Laodicea. First, Colossians tells us that Paul never visited this nauseating church but that even in his day he was concerned about its health. In Colossians 2:1 He writes, ***“I want you to know how much I am struggling [concerned] for you AND FOR THOSE AT LAODICEA, and for all who have not met me personally.”*** We also know that Paul wrote a LETTER to the church in Laodicea, but it has been lost. In Colossians 4:15-16 Paul refers to this lost letter and says, ***“Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea. When this epistle is read among you, make sure it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans and that likewise you read THE LETTER TO LAODICEA.”***

Another indication of his prayerful concern for this church is found in Colossians 4:17 where Paul gives a stern warning to one of the church leaders in that city. He says, ***“Tell Archippus: ‘See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.’”*** The letter to the church in Colossae was written thirty years before the book of REVELATION. Perhaps Archippus’ failure to do what Jesus had commanded started the Laodicean church’s downward spiral.

Now the CITY of Laodicea was the most FAMOUS of all the seven—and FOUR things made it so.

1.) First and foremost it was known all over the world for it’s great WEALTH.

You see, Laodicea was an incredibly rich banking, trade, and industrial center—and to show you just HOW wealthy this town was---in 60 AD an earthquake leveled Laodicea. When the dust settled the Roman government offered to send money to pay for the rebuilding—but the residents of Laodicea declined----and paid for the restoration out of their own VERY deep pockets. The Roman historian Tacitus referred to this and wrote, *“Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources and with no help from us.”*

So, the city of Laodicea had money to burn.

2.) It was also a city that was famous for its WOOL.

The countryside that surrounded Laodicea was renowned for a certain breed of black-wooled sheep—like these. There was a kind of violet, glossy darkness about their wool that made it popular. In fact, Laodicean factories made at least four different kinds of outer garments from this wool, garments that were exported to “department stores” all over the world. Think of it---no need for dying because the wool came black. I guess in Laodicea it wasn’t derogatory to refer to someone as the *“black sheep of the family.”* Instead, you would say he or she was the *“white sheep of the family.”* In any case, this export is part of what helped keep the Laodicean coffers full to overflowing.

3.) This city was also widely-known for its medical WONDERS.

There was a famous school of medicine in Laodicea—a school that produced not just doctors, but popular medicines for the ears—and especially the EYES. Their eye salve was pretty much the only medicine used to treat eye problems in that day and age---which meant even MORE money for this city and its residents. So, to summarize, as Ray Stedman puts it, *“Laodicea was sort of a first century Bank of America, Macy’s, and Mayo Clinic all rolled into one.”*

4.) Laodicea was also known for its WATER.

You see, Laodicea had no natural water supply---which meant they had to pipe it all in. They got their hot water from nearby Hierapolis where were hot mineral springs but by the time the water got to Laodicea via aqueducts, like these, it was no longer hot. It was lukewarm. Plus, it was brackish and smelled like minerals. They got their cold water was piped in from Colossae, but it too would be tepid by the time it got to Laodicea---so this was NOT a town where you could find a cold, refreshing drink of water. Instead of SATISFYING your thirst, the water you got in this town would tend to make you as QUEASY as we were in those vans going around endless curves in West Virginia---and the same was true of that lukewarm mineral water from Hierapolis. You would get out of the shower feeling nauseous.

Okay, with all this CONTEXT in mind, let's turn now to the TEXT. I'm reading from Revelation 3:14-22. If able, stand in respect for God's Word.

Revelation 3:14-22

14 – “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Ruler of God's creation.

15 – I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!

16 – So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of My mouth.

17 – 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.

18 – I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness—and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

19 – Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

20 – Here I am! 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.

21 – To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on My throne, just as I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

22 – He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Now did you notice HOW Jesus began His letter? Before He got to His criticism of this church full of lukewarm believers, He reminded them exactly WHO was writing. I think the idea was to motivate them to pay close attention to what He had to say.

1.) First, He says “I am the AMEN.”

Now, we are familiar with this word because we say “AMEN” all the time. We conclude our prayers with these four letters. We also use them when we want to express our agreement with a statement like when the pastor says something in His sermon that we agree with---or when we hear a message in song that rings true. Well, identifying Himself as **“THE AMEN”** meant that Jesus was about to say something that was not only true but extremely important. He was telling them they better pay close attention because the words that were to follow were truth that the hearer would neglect at his or her own peril.

2.) Second, Jesus says, “I am the FAITHFUL and TRUE WITNESS.”

In other words, Jesus not only tells the truth—He tells ALL the truth. He doesn't pull punches. He doesn't hide anything. He doesn't minimize or exaggerate. He tells the HARD truth. Jesus was about to faithfully, plainly, clearly reveal to the church EVERYTHING that the church needed to understand.

3.) Finally, Jesus says, “I am the RULER of CREATION.”

This is a reference to the opening verses of John's gospel where it says, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God all things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that was made.”** This phrase also brings to mind 2nd Corinthians 5:17 where it says, **“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.”** In other words, this identifying phrase is a reminder that the writer of this letter is God—God Who created the world, and who also RE-creates the world. The Author of these Words is our Lord---Who MADE all things and also REDEEMS all things. This is WHO is speaking—and by the way, as their CREATOR—it is not surprising that He would know what is best for the members of this church to hear.

So, to summarize, Christ is **“the AMEN, the FAITHFUL and TRUE WITNESS, the RULER of God's CREATION.”** This is WHO says, **“Your behavior makes Me want to vomit.”** I mean, think of it, when Jesus said, **“I know your deeds”** to the church at Philadelphia it was cause for rejoicing---but here in Laodicea it was cause for mourning. THEIR deeds showed SERIOUS problems. While Jesus was DISAPPOINTED with Ephesus, He was literally DISGUSTED with Laodicea.

But don't misunderstand me—there is no ANGER here—only HONESTY. Jesus' words are full of compassion and a desire for this church to change its nauseating course. Of course, the LOVING thing to do to this wayward church was rebuke

them. Only that could turn them around. As I have said many times in the past, the purpose of preaching to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and this comfortable church NEEDED afflicting.

Okay, what exactly was going on? Why was Jesus nauseated? Well, it all stemmed from the fact that these Christians had come to embrace a very weak, limp commitment. This is what Jesus was getting at in verses 15-16 when He said, ***“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of My mouth.”***

Now the word, ***“cold”*** represents people who are opposed to God—people who love sin—like those Jesus describes in Matthew 24:12 when He said, ***“Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow COLD.”*** The word ***“hot”*** represents those on the opposite end of the spectrum—people who are passionate followers of Jesus like those two travelers on the Emmaus Road—who described their time with the risen Lord by saying, ***“Were not our hearts BURNING within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us!?”*** (Luke 12:32)

Well, the Laodiceans were NEITHER. They weren’t COLD—I mean, they still believed Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the world—but the passion they once had for Him had cooled to the tepid temperature of their drinking water. They had LUKEWARM hearts. Their commitment to Jesus was as limp as an over-cooked noodle.

My family loves Thai food—but I don’t. Those drunken noodles—over-cooked noodles—make me nauseated. And that’s what this church was like. They were like LIMP NOODLES. They had no enthusiasm, no emotion, no urgency, no compassion. John Stott writes, *“The Laodicean church was a half-hearted church. [And] perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to [our] 21st century than this. It describes vividly the respectable, sentimental, nominal, skin-deep religiosity which is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity is flabby and anemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion.”*

And let’s face it, Stott is right. Many of us are AFRAID of that old phrase that used to describe committed Christians. We’re afraid of people thinking we are *“on fire”* for Jesus. We’re afraid of what others might think if we really took our faith SERIOUSLY. The interesting thing is while we avoid being ON FIRE for Jesus so many of us have no problem being fanatically ON FIRE in other areas of life. For example—how many of you shouted yourself hoarse as you watched the March Madness games? How many of you NEVER miss your favorite podcast? How many of you wait for a new season of your favorite show to air—and then you binge-watch every episode?

As I’ve told you before, when I was a teenager I was an ON FIRE fan of The Monkees. I had all their albums. I wore my belt buckle on the right like Mickey Dolenz and had a knit hat like Mike Nesmith. I never missed one of their silly TV shows. I knew all of their songs by heart. I was a Monkee maniac. In fact, I was thrilled when my parents bought a new Pontiac station wagon because that was the car frame they used to build the Monkeemobile!

And don’t laugh because you’ve been just as FANATICAL about something else in life—whether it’s a hobby or your favorite football team. I mean, we have no problem being PASSIONATE about other things—but not our Christian faith—no—that would make us stand out a little too much. Others might think we were going a little crazy if we got REALLY serious about our walk with Jesus.

Years ago, I read a story about an eccentric man who walked around town with a sandwich sign slung over his shoulders. The front of the sign said, *“I am a fool for Christ’s sake.”* As he strolled the streets, he was ridiculed by those who saw the FRONT of his placard, until he walked by, and they saw the BACK where it said: *“Whose fool are you?”* This guy got it right because we are ALL fools for something or someone—and sadly MOST of the time it’s not Jesus. Listen friends—in Christianity there is no room for lukewarm neutrality. The individual who has not declared FOR Christ is AGAINST Him. Weak commitment is NO commitment. William Barclay writes, *“The very expression ‘a lukewarm Christian’ is a contradiction in terms, for a lukewarm Christian has no claim to be called a Christian at all.”*

And I know this sounds hard—but a Christ follower can ONLY be a CHRIST follower. We can’t be passionate about Jesus AND something else that is contradictory to His Lordship. As Jesus said, ***“No man can serve two masters: for either he***

will hate the one and love the other or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. No man can serve God and mammon. (Matthew 6:24)

Now WHY would Jesus prefer us to be COLD rather than LUKEWARM? Isn't it better to be a weak Christian than a non-believer or a blatant sin lover? Well, think of it this way. A train that is OFF the tracks like the one in this picture still keeps the tracks clear for other trains. But—a train that is part on and part off—like this one—stops traffic completely. And a believer who is lukewarm is like that second train. They try to serve GOD and MAMMON—and their lukewarm hypocrisy actually does more harm than good—because it “blocks the tracks” and keeps people from putting their faith in God.

You see, a lukewarm, passionless believer, loses his or her power to attract people. In fact, they have a REPELLING effect. On the other hand—a Christian—or CHURCH—that is ON FIRE—PASSIONATE in the way they follow Christ is incredibly attractive.

Years ago, I read about Dr. Nathan Barlow—a medical missionary who spent 60 years in the hills of Ethiopia treating people with a debilitating condition called “mossy foot.” Mossy Foot is found in rural areas where people work in volcanic soil. It causes swelling and ulcers in the feet and lower legs. The subsequent deformity makes people with this illness social outcasts—they are treated as lepers. Dr. Barlow was passionate in his commitment to help these people—and to show you HOW passionate—once Dr. Barlow got a bad toothache and the pain was so intense, he had to fly home from the mission field to get medical attention. He told the dentist that he didn't ever want to leave the mission field for the sake of teeth again—so he had that dentist pull out ALL of his teeth and give him false ones so he wouldn't slow God' work in Ethiopia.

Now, I know that sounds crazy—but it moves me. I ADMIRE that kind of commitment. I am SO IMPRESSED by the way this man focused on HEAVENLY treasures. I stand in AWE of his commitment to these people.

And speaking of those people—can you imagine the impression this had on the lost people of Ethiopia. They would have thought, *“This man cares more about treating our illnesses—and telling us about Jesus than he does about his own teeth! Surely, he is worth hearing. I need to know more about this Jesus.”*

Many times, God uses our Christian CONVICTION to CONVICT others of their need for Him. You see, people are looking for something or someone WORTH following so they are drawn to passion. They are attracted to ON FIRE believers in the same way we are drawn to a warm fire on a cold night.

Clovis Chappell tells the story of Uncle George, the town atheist in a small Tennessee town who was never known to go to church. On Sunday mornings he would sit in front of the village store and whittle and ridicule the church. But one day, the church caught on fire. There was no fire department in town, so the people formed a bucket brigade. Uncle George stood at the head of the fire brigade dashing water on the flames. The pastor saw him and said, *“This is the first time I ever saw you at church, George.”* “Yes,” he said, *“but it is the first time I ever saw the church on fire, parson.”*

Listen if we are to be effective in reaching the lost we need to be ON FIRE. Well, are you—ON FIRE? Does your heart and life BURN with devotion to Jesus—or are you more like the TEPID believers in Laodicea? Would you describe yourself as totally in love with Jesus? Or do the words *“halfhearted,” “lukewarm,”* and *“partially committed”* fit better?

In his best-selling book, *Crazy Love*, Francis Chan gives us a good diagnostic list to consult for help in answering this question. He says, *“Lukewarm people attend church fairly regularly. After all, it is what is expected of them. It's what they believe 'good Christians' do, so they go.”*

If that describes you then listen to what God says in Isaiah 29:13: ***“These people come near Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship of Me is made up only of rules taught by men.”***

Here's another thing Chan says. *"Lukewarm people give money to charity and to the church as long as it doesn't impinge on their standard of living."* If that fits you then hear the words of 1st Chronicles 21:24: ***"I will not take to the Lord---I will not sacrifice a burnt offering---that costs me nothing."***

Here's a third symptom. *"Lukewarm people tend to choose what is popular over what is right when they are in conflict. They desire to fit in both at church and outside the church. They care more about what people think of their actions than what God thinks of their hearts and lives."*

If that rings a bell in your own life, then hear Jesus' words from Luke 6:26: ***"Woe to you when ALL men speak well of you."***

Here's a few more.

"Lukewarm people are moved by stories about people who do radical things for Jesus, yet they do not act. They gauge their morality or goodness by comparing themselves to the secular world. They say they love Jesus, and He is indeed a part of their lives but only a part."

Anyone feel the need to "heat up" a bit? Anyone feel a little lukewarm?

Now in spite of their sin, Jesus loved these lukewarm Laodicean believers. They may not have been passionate about Him---but He was passionate about them. As I said a moment ago, His words of stern rebuke are prompted by compassion. Look at verse 19 where Jesus writes, ***"Those whom I love, [which means YOU LAODICIANS] I rebuke and discipline."*** So, these aren't ANGRY words—they are LOVING words. Jerome once said, *"The greatest anger of God is when God withdraws His anger from us."* So, when God chastens us—when He rebukes us—when He disciplines us as He does this church—we should thank Him. We should feel loved.

If you are like me, then you remember times when, because of your rebellious or foolish actions, you forced your parents to LOVE you by disciplining you. Their discipline hurt—but you also knew that it was a sign of your parent's love for you---and there is a great deal of security in that kind of love. Well, Jesus wanted these Christians to have that same sense of security. He wanted them to know that even with all their half-heartedness, He still loved HIS church in Laodicea—loved them too much to allow them to go their lukewarm way---so, borrowing from things that were true about their town Jesus told them what they needed to do.

1.) First, He said that there were things they needed to BUY from Him.

Now, this would have shocked these believers. After all, they lived in a town that was known for its wealth—a self-sufficient town that didn't need even the emperor's money. But Jesus knew their thoughts before they thought them so in verse 17 He said, ***"You say—you THINK—'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."***

Okay, what did Jesus want them to buy?

a. First He says, "Buy from Me GOLD refined in the fire, so you can BECOME rich."

And as I said, this would have hit home. I'm sure the people sitting in church the day this letter was read NEVER had money problems. They had tons of cash---more than they could spend. Their pockets were full of gold coins. After all this was a banking center town. Christians came to services in the Lexus or "beemer" version of a 1st century chariot.

So, with this first suggested purchase Jesus was saying they needed to stop trusting in their banks—and begin trusting in and relying on Him. He was saying, *"You think you are rich---but you are poor spiritually. You need TRUE wealth—and that is only found in a growing relationship with Me."*

b. Second, He said they needed to buy, "WHITE CLOTHES to wear, so they could cover their shameful nakedness."

This would have caused ears to perk up as well because remember, this town was known for its clothing. In fact, I imagine most of the members were wearing something made of that glossy black wool. Think of them sitting there in expensive black tuxedos—as they heard Jesus say, *“You are naked. You think you’re wearing the best—but you’re all sitting in your birthday suits. You’re no better than the foolish emperor in that Hans Christian Anderson story!”*

Of course, Jesus is not talking about “color” here—but rather the stain of sin. He’s saying, *“If you follow Me closely---if you keep our relationship alive and growing---I’ll work to make you more and more like Me every day. Hang in there because one day when you get to Heaven that process will be completed and you’ll be perfectly pure.”* The fact is everyone is morally naked before God. We all have secret sins deep within that no one else knows—but God knows. No matter how WELL we dress, God sees our sin.

No matter how much GOOD we do—we are still bad to the core. As Isaiah tells us, our own righteousness is nothing but filthy rags. What we all need is to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. We need our “robes” — our lives — our actions and attitudes — washed clean in the blood of the Lamb.

c. Finally Jesus says that they need to buy, “SALVE to put on their eyes, so they could see.”

And once again He was borrowing from the everyday experience of a Laodicean living next to this medical center renowned for its eye medicine to make a spiritual point. You see, their SPIRITUAL eyes were messed up. Their world view had become myopic. Perhaps the wealth of their town had blinded them—but they could no longer see themselves as they were. They could no longer see sin as sin.

To summarize, Jesus’ first counsel for them was to go shopping—they needed to BUY these three things from Him. They needed to invest in SPIRITUAL wealth. They needed to repent of their sinful self-sufficiency and ask Him to forgive them and clothe them in His righteousness.

And they needed Him to renew their minds—to heal their perceptions so they could see clearly again. To quote the hymn, they needed to, *“turn their eyes upon Jesus”* They needed to, *“look full in His wonderful face”* so that *“the things of earth would grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”*

But of course, they couldn’t do any of this on their own. They needed Jesus’ help which leads me to point out our Lord’s second instruction.

2.) You see, not only were there things they needed to buy FROM Him, there was a door they needed to OPEN for Him.

Look at verse 20 where Jesus says, *“Here I am! 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.”*

In short, Jesus says, *“Let Me into your lives once again.”* The word for “sup” here is the word for the evening meal—the meal that these people lingered over—the meal where they would eat and talk for hours. This was a time set aside every day for unhurried fellowship. And this is the meal Jesus wanted to share. No more nausea—but wholesome, stomach filling food and close, intimate fellowship. Now—do you see the irony in this? Do you see the grace in this 20th verse? Jesus—GOD IN THE FLESH—Who MADE their hearts---was humbly knocking on their heart’s door, asking for admission.

Almighty God—their Creator and Redeemer—was asking to come into their lives. There was a time when the door of these Laodicean lives were wide open to Him but something happened—and that door was closed. Now He was standing knocking asking to come in. I’m sure you’re familiar with this painting by Holman Hunt. When it was unveiled people said that He made a mistake because there was no latch or doorknob on the outside. But Hunt said that no—this was no mistake because the latch was on the inside. His point was Jesus doesn’t force His way in---it’s our choice. He only comes in when we decide to open the door.

And this is one of the unique things about our faith. No other religion has a seeking God—but that’s what the one true God does. Jesus came, *“to seek and save the lost.”*

Well, Christian, when was the last time you opened the door of your life to Him? How intimate is Your walk with God right now? How passionate are you in your commitment to our Lord?