

(The Lord and His Church) 10. the Proud Church

by Zac Poonen

The Lord calls the church to repentance and to overcome, promising spiritual wealth and fellowship with Him to those who surrender their will and desires to Him.

Scripture: Leviticus 6:13, Matthew 13:44, Matthew 21:31, Luke 11:24, Luke 18:9, John 13:35, Colossians 1:17, 2 Timothy 2:12, Hebrews 12:8, 2 Peter 2:21, Revelation 3:14

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Spiritual Revival"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches about the church in Laodicea, highlighting the dangers of being lukewarm in faith, neither fully committed nor completely worldly. He emphasizes the importance of being on fire for God, fervently loving others, and avoiding spiritual deadness and self-righteousness. Poonen urges believers to repent, be zealous, and open their hearts to Jesus, who offers redemption and spiritual riches to those willing to pay the price of surrender. He reminds listeners that discipline from the Lord is a sign of His love and calls for wholehearted repentance and overcoming the world, just as Jesus did.

Transcript

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore and repent. Behold I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

(Revelation 3:14-22).

Respectable and Dead

The Lord calls Himself here the Amen - the One whose word will certainly be fulfilled. He is also the faithful and true Witness who tells the truth exactly as it is. He is also the Beginning (or the Author) of the creation of God. He is the One who created the first creation and He is the One Who began the new creation, through His death and resurrection. "He is BEFORE all things" (Colossians 1:17) - the Author of everything visible and invisible, the Beginning and the End.

Here is another church that did not have any Jezebels or false teachings in it. They were neither immoral nor evil. But they were not on fire for God either. They were just plain "lukewarm" (verse 16). They were dead right in their doctrines - but they were both dead and right! They were morally respectable - and spiritually dead!

The Lord wants our hearts to be on fire at all times - aflame with a fervent love for Him and for other believers.

"Fire shall be kept burning continually on the altar; it is not to go out", was the old-covenant Law (Leviticus 6:13).

Symbolically we see here what God expects the normal state of the true disciple of Jesus to be. Anything less than this is sub-standard. When the burning bush was aflame with the fire of the Lord, no insects or germs could survive within it. And when our hearts are aflame with the fire of the Spirit, no unloving attitudes can survive therein either.

This is one way by which we can test whether we are hot, cold or lukewarm: To be "hot" is to love others fervently. To be "cold" is to be bitter and unforgiving towards others. To be "lukewarm" is to have neither bitterness nor love towards others.

When a believer says, "I have nothing in my heart against anyone", he is lukewarm. Did Jesus say, "All men will know that you are my disciples when you have nothing in your hearts against each other"? No. The absence of evil attitudes towards each other is NOT the identifying mark of the disciples of Jesus (cf. John 13:35).

We must have something in our hearts. We must have fervent love for all our fellow-believers. Love is a positive virtue and not just the absence of evil.

To cast out the spirit of bitterness from our heart and then to leave it cleansed and empty is the surest way to be lukewarm and to finally end up in a worse state than at the beginning (Luke 11:24-26).

The world says, "Something is better than nothing". If so, then one would think that it is better to be lukewarm than cold. But that is not what the Lord says. He says, "I would that you were cold" (verse 15). He would rather see us totally worldly than half-hearted.

The lukewarm, compromising Christian does a lot more damage to the cause of Christ on earth than the worldly unbeliever. The unbeliever does not take the name of Christ, and so his worldliness cannot be a hindrance to the gospel. But a compromising, half-hearted Christian takes the name of Christ and disgraces that Name among the heathen by his worldliness.

The cold, worldly unbeliever is also far more likely to come to an awareness of his spiritual need than the lukewarm, self-righteous Pharisee (See Matthew 21:31).

It is for these reasons that the Lord says that He would rather see us cold than lukewarm.

In practical terms this means that if you have no longing to be free from the love of money or from anger and impure thoughts (to take just three areas of sin), it would be better if you remained an unbeliever than one claiming to be a disciple of Jesus. There is more hope for you if you are cold than if you are lukewarm. This is amazing, but true.

Not Knowing One's Condition

The church at Laodicea was proud of what it possessed. The "believers" there considered themselves rich and needing nothing - perhaps because they were rich in knowledge of the truth and had a good reputation before men and had a lot of money as well. Respectable leaders in Laodicean society may also have been members of their church.

Like the Pharisee who prayed in the temple, these Christians may have imagined themselves to be spiritual, because of the wealth of their religious activities (Luke 18:9-14).

Whatever the reason, there was certainly no poverty of spirit either in the messenger or among those in the church.

Both the messenger and the church were completely unaware of their backslidden state - just like many today. The Lord's opinion of them was the exact opposite of their own evaluation of themselves. He calls them, "wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked" (verse 17). What strong adjectives the Lord used to show them that their condition was pathetic indeed!

In Sardis, the messenger and the church had a reputation before others that they were "spiritual". In Laodicea, they didn't even have that reputation. They were "spiritual" only in their own eyes.

The vast majority of believers have a far higher opinion of their own spirituality than the Lord has of them. This is true of believers in every Christian group. Very, very few believers have a true and realistic estimate of themselves - because very, very few are ruthlessly honest with themselves.

It is more than likely that YOU yourself have a far higher opinion of your spirituality than the Lord has of you. Humble yourself and cry out to the Lord to give you His evaluation of your life. Why not put this book down for a few moments and make that prayer right now....

The believers at Laodicea may at one time have been on fire like those in Philadelphia. But they had backslidden and become careless about their spiritual life. They still held the doctrines of the Spirit-filled life. But they had lost the reality of that life.

Peter says about such people,

"It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them." (2 Peter 2:21).

Vomited Out by the Lord

What does the Lord do with such people? He says that He will spit (vomit) the messenger and the church out of His mouth (verse 16).

What do we vomit out of our mouths? We vomit out food that we ate, but which did not get digested, and therefore which did not become a part of our physical body.

When we give ourselves to the Lord, the intention is that we become "digested by Him" ("It is no longer I but Christ") and thus become a part of His Body. If however, we still continue seeking our own, then we will end up like that undigested food; and our ultimate end will be to be vomited out by the Lord.

You may even have been the Lord's messenger for a time, and yet be vomited out so that you are no longer His messenger. We can be "in Christ" at one time and be vomited out later so that we are out of Him.

However, the Lord still had hope for this messenger and for this church. This is amazing indeed. He is always seeking to redeem even that which is wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. What men would have discarded long ago, the Lord still seeks to salvage. That's why even the worst among us can have hope. We can all be salvaged - if we repent.

A Price to be Paid

The Lord advises the messenger and the church to BUY gold, white garments and eyesalve from Him (verse 18).

There are some things in the Christian life that are free. Forgiveness of sins and the baptism in the Spirit are free gifts of God.

But the parables of the hidden treasure in the field and of the man seeking fine pearls, teach unmistakably that the kingdom of God can be obtained only by those who are willing to give up everything. (Matthew 13:44-46).

To the Christians at Laodicea too, the Lord says the same thing - that they have to pay a price to obtain spiritual wealth. They have to buy it.

Gold refined by fire symbolises the divine nature that is pure, without any alloy in it. This is what we need to partake of - within us.

The white garment speaks of outward righteousness - purity in our external life, speech, behaviour etc.

Eyesalve refers to the revelation of the Holy Spirit that enables us to see everything from God's point of view. Thus we can understand God's Word and His purposes, and also see ourselves as God sees us. It enables us to see the worthlessness of earthly wealth and honour too.

To obtain all of these, we have to pay a price. We have to forsake everything and be "sold-out" for God. If we do that, we can have these riches that the Lord offers - real riches that have eternal value.

The Lord then says that He rebukes and disciplines only those whom He loves (verse 19). It is a great comfort to know this. When we are corrected and chastened by the Lord, we can bear in mind that these are but indications of His great love. They prove that He still has hope for us.

If on the contrary, when you sin, you don't feel rebuked in your conscience, and you are not chastened by the Lord, then you are truly on dangerous ground. Perhaps the Lord has given up trying to change you. And maybe the reason is that you have persistently refused to hear His gentle voice of correction in the

past.

Repent then, and turn to Him again, before it is too late altogether.

"If you are without discipline, of which ALL (true sons) have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." (Hebrews 12:8).

The Call to Repentance

The Lord exhorts the messenger and the church at Laodicea to "burn with zeal and repent" (verse 19). Even our repentance can be sluggish. We must be zealous and wholehearted about our repentance too.

The Lord is now standing outside the church, knocking, trying to get in (verse 20). In the meetings of the church however, it is "Business As Usual" with praise and prayer and preaching going on with monotonous regularity. But the congregation is blissfully ignorant of the fact that the Lord Himself is on the outside!

Don't ever belong to a church where the Lord Himself is outside the door. For if He is on the outside, you have no business to be inside yourself!! You should be outside too. If the bridegroom is standing outside, the bride should be with her bridegroom.

The Lord now calls individuals in the church to open their hearts to Him. How can they do that? The context makes it clear that it is by burning with zeal and repenting that they can open the door. The door is not the door of our intellect or the door of our emotions. It is the door of our will. When the will is yielded, then the Lord enters in and fellowships (dines) with us in our spirit.

Again there is the call to overcome. This time He specifies that we can overcome **EVEN AS HE ALSO OVERCAME** in the days when He was on earth (verse 21).

Jesus was the first Overcomer. He is our Forerunner, Who has already overcome the world, the flesh and the Devil. Thus He was exalted to sit down with the Father on His throne. Now we can overcome all of these just as He did. If we do, we too can sit with Him on His throne one day, as His Bride.

"If we endure, we shall also reign with Him." (2 Timothy 2:12).

Finally, we hear the same word again at the end: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (verse 22).

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