

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. <sup>15</sup> I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.*

*<sup>19</sup> Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. <sup>20</sup> 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.*

*<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (Revelation 3:14-22)*

### Is God Talking about Us?

A funny thing happened to me this week. I was visiting an elderly member of our congregation. Once upon a time, she was very involved in our ministry here. But old age and ill health have taken their toll. While we were talking, she felt the need to apologize for the fact that she can't get to church anymore. But she wanted me to know that she watches four different religious services on TV every Sunday morning. Then she said, "The sermon I get from them is as good or better than the one I would get at church." Wow. I guess God wanted me to reflect on whether I'm spending enough time writing my sermons. Now, the truth is, I don't think she intended to insult me. It's been a few years since she was in church and she's been served by different pastors over the years and she is having a little trouble tracking. But at the same time, when a member of your congregation says something like that, as a pastor, you really can't help but ask – are my sermons really that bad? Now, I'm not looking for compliments here and I don't want you all to come out of church telling me, "Oh no pastor, your sermons are good." My point is that when we hear a criticism it's natural for us to wonder if it's aimed at us. We may even get defensive and feel the need to push back and justify why we do things the way we do. Or we might just crumble and feel awful. We might even try to turn it back on the person making the criticism and point out all that they do wrong. None of that is really helpful. Today, God makes a very serious criticism of a congregation whose members lived and died almost two thousand years ago. But God preserved this criticism for all those centuries. When we read these words, it's natural for us to ask: **is God talking about us?** In fact, God wants us to ask that question.

#### I.

The hardest part of the criticism Jesus makes probably worries the most: **are we lukewarm?** The opening chapters of the book of Revelation contain seven letters written to seven churches that used to exist in the country we today call Turkey. Jesus appeared to the Apostle John when he was a very old man, in exile on a tiny island called Patmos. The Lord dictated these seven letters to these seven churches back on the mainland. Most of the letters contained a criticism but also a compliment from the Lord. But this one didn't have any compliment, only a criticism.

What was that criticism? Jesus said, **"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."** What does that criticism mean? Jesus was talking about their commitment to living their faith. So finally, he was talking about how much the gospel really meant to them. To be "hot" would mean to be on fire for the gospel. It would mean that you cared deeply about what God's word says and you try to live according to that word. It would mean that you study it at home and that you come to church and to Bible classes to learn to know it better. It would mean that you do all that you can, according to the gifts God has given you, to help with the ministry of the gospel and to support spreading that good news. Obviously, being "hot" is a good thing.

But what about being "cold"? What would that mean? It would mean being against the truth and actively opposing the life God calls us to live. Now, that clearly is not a good thing. But Jesus says it's better

than being “lukewarm.” How can that be? Being lukewarm means that you just don’t care. You go through the motions. You show up for church enough so that you don’t get a phone call from the pastor or the elders. You get your kids to Sunday school or the Lutheran elementary school or high school. You put a few bucks into the collection plate. And you figure you’re good.

Jesus explains the issue further. He says, **“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.”** How could a person be wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked and think they were rich? Only if they don’t understand what real wealth is. You can have a wonderful family life, you can make a lot of money and live in a comfortable house, you can look around on Thanksgiving Day and see that you are so much more blessed than so many other people, and you can still be spiritually poverty stricken. How? By having a faith that is so weak that it doesn’t actually change your life. It doesn’t reorder your priorities. It doesn’t take every thought captive to the word of God. It doesn’t drive you to live for Jesus.

Jesus says it would better for us to be actively opposed to the gospel – to be “cold” – than to be lukewarm, to be members who aren’t engaged, who like the idea of being members of a church but don’t want to get a reputation for being too fanatical, who don’t want to make other people uncomfortable because they bring up their faith too much. Why would it be better to be cold than lukewarm? Because at least a “cold” person cares about spiritual things. And that means that there’s a chance that the cold person will actually interact with the gospel and change. What’s the opposite of love? Most counselors will say it’s not hate. It’s indifference. If a couple comes to my office because they’re having problems, and they’re angry and they hurt each other, that’s bad. But it’s better than if they just don’t care anymore what the other one says or thinks or does. It might be possible to forgive and heal anger and hurt. It’s really, really hard to undo indifference. The same is true spiritually. If we are lukewarm, if we just don’t care all that much about what God says in here, then Jesus is about to spit us out of his mouth, just like we would be tempted to spit out a meal that sat too long on the dinner table and got cold.

John said, **“These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.”** This wasn’t just some idle gossip from people who didn’t know what they’re talking about. This wasn’t griping by someone with no power to do anything about it. This was the evaluation of the Son of God, the Ruler of all Creation, and the faithful witness to the truth. That is what Jesus had to say about this congregation.

We wouldn’t want him to say that about us, would we? Is he? Obviously, Jesus was talking to a specific congregation in the ancient city of Laodicea. But God preserved this warning for all of us. The people there were well off in John’s day. And the Bible warns again and again how wealth can deceive us. When God blesses us with worldly comforts and wealth, when God takes care of us and we can see how good we have it, a strange thing can happen in our sinful hearts: we become complacent. You would think that looking around and recognizing how good we have it would cause us to get down on our knees and thank the God who rules all things for our good. But so often, we just assume we deserve it. We worked for it and it’s ours. And it’s never going away. Worse, our lives become all about that money, that comfortable lifestyle, and all the entertainment and relaxation and diversions that go with it.

Is Jesus talking about us? Well, let me ask you, just to pick on one thing: how much effort did you put into sports activities in the last year? Taking your kids to these practices and games. Coaching or participating in sports yourself. Watching games on TV or going to them live. How does that compare with the effort you put into feeding your faith? How much effort did you put into reading your Bible at home? How faithful were you about being in church? Do you come to any kind of Bible study? Do you do devotions in your home with your children? Do you talk about your faith in front of your kids and your spouse? Notice, I haven’t even asked if you’re willing to serve on a board or work on a project or how much money you give to the Lord. Are you “hot”? Are you on fire for the gospel? Or are you “cold”? Do you have serious spiritual questions about the work we do here and it gets under your skin? Or are you lukewarm? Do you drift through your church life without anything that happens here ever really touching you or getting you excited? Is God talking about us, here at Peace Lutheran Church?

## II.

It’s hard not to see ourselves in these words, isn’t it? We might be tempted to get a little defensive here and trot out all kinds of excuses and explanations for our priorities – and that would show just how close to

home Jesus' words are hitting in our hearts. Most of us have to admit that there are times when we're just not on fire for the gospel. There are times when we just want to come and go from church without getting sucked into some effort or some program. There's a part of us that wants a comfortable Christianity that doesn't make too many demands on us. That part of us is our sinful nature. It's the part of us that doesn't really believe we're sinners and so doesn't see any real need to repent. But God says these things to us because he knows better. **Is God talking about us? Are we the ones he rebukes and disciplines?**

The answer is yes. But notice what Jesus said: **"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent."** Jesus didn't have John write these words to the church in Laodicea because he was giving up on them and sending them to hell. Jesus sent this message because he loved those people and he didn't want their complacency to kill their faith and drag them into hell. Jesus loves us just as much. And he warns us of the same danger. In fact, he goes on to say that he is standing at the door and knocking. What door? The door of our heart. Every time he confronts our sin, he is banging on the door of our heart, demanding to be let in.

But Jesus doesn't come in to punish us. Jesus says, **"If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me."** A couple of weeks ago, after confirmation, my wife and I went to a confirmation party. We sat down and ate a nice meal and chatted for a couple of hours with different members of our church and family and friends of the confirmands. It was a very nice afternoon. Jesus uses that picture of sitting down to a meal with someone who loves us to picture his purpose for us. He doesn't confront our sin to drive us to sobs and despair. He confronts our sin, our complacency, our ability to drift in and out of this building without anything touching us here, so that our sin and complacency don't rob us of our faith and steal him away from us. Jesus loves us so much that he wants to spend eternity with us – that's the meal we will have with Jesus.

So, repent of all that sin and complacency. Recognize that it's the unbeliever in our hearts who doesn't care what happens in here and who coasts along with anything here touching him. Admit that those attitudes deserve God's judgment. But trust that Jesus forgives even those sins. Jesus was the only perfect church member who ever lived. He was always on fire for the gospel all his life long. Then in the ultimate act of dedication to God, he laid that perfect down for us on the cross to pay for all our sins and complacency and lack of caring. That perfect life and that death take all our sins away. Jesus rose to tell us we are forgiven and loved. No matter how blind and foolish and complacent we have been, we still belong to him. That message has the power to make us truly hot – to set us on fire for the gospel.

Jesus makes a promise to us: **"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."** How do we overcome? By admitting our sin and trusting in Jesus to save us. By putting our faith into practice and letting it change our lives. Be on fire for the gospel. Make coming to church a priority. Study the Bible at home. Study it together with your family. Pray for our work here and be a part of our ministry. Be prepared to share your faith. But don't think for a moment that doing all that gets you heaven. You already have heaven. Do all that because you understand how much your Lord has given you and how much he loves you. Amen.