

## **BEWARE OF LUKEWARM CHRISTIANITY**

*3* <sup>14</sup>To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: This is what the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the Ruler\* of God's creation, says: <sup>15</sup>I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were [either] cold or hot. <sup>16</sup>Because you are lukewarm—neither cold nor hot—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and have need of nothing." But you do not realize that you are wretched and pitiable and poor and blind and naked. <sup>18</sup>[Therefore,] I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you may become rich; and white garments, so that you may clothe yourself and not allow the shame of your nakedness to be exposed; and eye salve to put on your eyes, so that you may see. <sup>19</sup>All those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. Therefore, be earnest and repent. <sup>20</sup>Look! I am standing at the door, knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him. I will dine with him, and he [will dine] 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. (Rev. 3:14-22)

\*The Greek term, ἡ ἀρχὴ, has the meaning, "the ruler," as well as "the beginning" (A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament, United Bible Societies, London, 1971.) The former meaning, "*the Ruler of God's creation*," is preferable.

### **Introduction**

There's nothing better than a cup of steaming hot tea when you are sick with the flu and it's a bitter cold winter day. When your throat is sore and your body is chilled, what really meets your need is a large mug of piping hot tea with a spoonful of honey—it's soothing and it's delicious!

There's nothing better than a tall glass of iced tea when you are exhausted from laboring under the hot sun on a summer's day. You just finished mowing the lawn on a hot and humid Saturday afternoon; now your dear wife brings you a tall glass of iced tea with lots of ice cubes and a sprig of mint—it's soothing and it's delicious!

There's nothing worse than a cup of lukewarm tea. You were just about to enjoy your cup of piping hot tea when the telephone rings. Twenty minutes later you return to your cup of tea. Without giving it a thought, you lift it to your lips only to discover that it has turned lukewarm—it tastes awful!

There's nothing worse than a glass of lukewarm tea. You were just about to enjoy your tall glass of iced tea when the neighbor called you over to view his garden. Twenty minutes later you finally break away from admiring his assortment of carrots and peas and return to your glass of iced tea. Without giving it a thought, you lift the glass to your lips only to discover that the ice has melted and the once-iced tea has become diluted and lukewarm—it tastes awful!

Is there anything worse than lukewarm tea? ‘Yes!’ says the Lord Jesus Christ, “What’s worse than that is lukewarm Christianity!” Let us now give our attention to the church in Laodicea, a church that the Lord Jesus describes as being “*lukewarm.*”

The dictionary defines “lukewarm” as, “lacking conviction,” or, “believing half-heartedly.” What we learn from the church in Laodicea is that an attitude of self-confidence and self-satisfaction can produce a lukewarm Christianity. Let us beware of lukewarm Christianity, because such is repugnant to Christ.

## **I. Beware of Lukewarm Christianity, ...which is Distasteful to Christ**

*“I know your works,”* declares the Lord Jesus. In this case He is referring to the church’s whole lifestyle, as opposed to individual and isolated acts. The Lord continues, *“you are neither cold nor hot”* (vs. 15.) The church in Laodicea had not blatantly denied Christ nor had they departed from the faith. They had not renounced their Christian faith in order to return to Judaism. They had not succumbed to the pressures of pagan neighbors and unbelieving family members and subsequently returned to Roman idolatry. But neither was this church wholly committed to Christ, offering themselves in service to Him, heeding His counsel and command: *“Seek first [God’s] kingdom and its righteousness”* (Matt. 6:33.)

The church was lukewarm; wavering somewhere between a state of faithfulness and apostasy. In the words of an old pop song, they were “caught between two lovers;” in this case, torn between their love for Christ and their love for the material benefits of the world. The condition of the church in Laodicea was much the same as in the days of Elijah the prophet, when he exhorted the people of Israel, *“How long will you waver between two opinions? If Jehovah is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. But the people said nothing”* (1 Kg. 18:21.)

The Lord Jesus agonizes over this present state of affairs: *“I wish that you were [either] cold or hot.”* Nothing is so distasteful to Christ as lukewarm Christianity. The man whose life is characterized by lukewarm Christianity has no desire to lose Christ for the sake of the world, but he has too much desire for the world to forsake its call in favor of discipleship to Christ! The Lord says to us what His servant Joshua said to Old Testament Israel:

*Now fear Jehovah and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Jehovah. <sup>15</sup>But if serving Jehovah seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve Jehovah.* (Josh. 24:14-15)

This state of spiritual fickleness—this state of being spiritually lukewarm—is extremely distasteful and revolting to the Lord because it is so contrary to His own

character: *“Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work’”* (Jn. 4:34.) Addressing His Father in prayer, the Lord Jesus declared, *“I glorified you on the earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do”* (Jn. 17:4.) The state of being spiritually lukewarm is so contrary to the purpose of Christ’s redeeming work: *“our Savior Jesus Christ; <sup>14</sup>... gave himself for us, so that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people for his own possession, [a people] zealous for good works”* (Titus 2:13-14.) The state of being spiritually lukewarm—is extremely distasteful and revolting to the Lord because the Lord is a jealous God: *“You shall have no other gods besides me”* (Ex. 20:3, 5a.) The Lord Jesus defines the first great commandment in these terms: *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”* (Matt. 22:37.)

The Lord now informs this church of the action He is about to take: *“Because you are lukewarm—neither cold nor hot—I am about to spit you out of my mouth”* (vs. 16.) Because these people wavered between Christ and the world—because they “straddled the fence” and refused to make a radical, unconditional commitment to Christ—Christ is about to make the decision for them. Note that the Lord Jesus warns the church in advance what He is about to do, so that she may take to heart the seriousness of the situation and make the necessary commitment of giving her first and full allegiance to Christ the Lord. But if she continues in her present state of spiritual fickleness, wavering between interest in Christ and love for the world, Christ Himself will take decisive action.

Let us beware of lukewarm Christianity, because it is distasteful, indeed, it is detestable, to Christ. With regard to the allegiance of the heart, there is no place for moderation or a position of neutrality; the Lord Jesus declares, *“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters”* (Matt. 12:30.) Religion is not just something to round out your life, true biblical religion must possess your life—the Lord Jesus Christ must be the Lord of every part of your life. We must give to the Lord Jesus Christ our full allegiance and make Him and His will our top priority.

## **II. Beware of Lukewarm Christianity, ...which Thrives in a Materially Affluent Environment**

In verse 17a our Lord quotes this church’s own assessment of itself: *“I am rich; I have acquired wealth and have need of nothing”*—there was a sense of security and self-sufficiency derived from their riches. With these words the church in Laodicea was making an almost God-like claim. Compare their assessment of themselves with the LORD’s own declaration to Old Testament Israel. The LORD declares to Israel: *“every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. <sup>11</sup>I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. <sup>12</sup>If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that it contains”* (Psl. 50:10-12.) Note, too, the accusation the LORD brought against the arrogant, self-confident ruler of Tyre:

*Son of man, say to the ruler of Tyre, This is what the Lord Jehovah says: In the pride of your heart you say, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas." But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god ... <sup>4</sup>By your wisdom and understanding you have gained wealth for yourself and amassed gold and silver in your treasuries. <sup>5</sup>By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud. (Ezek. 28:2,4-5)*

Laodicea was one of the richest commercial centers of the ancient world; it was famous for its banking as well as its woolen industry. By careful breeding, a soft, glossy black wool had been produced that brought international fame and fortune to this city. Like the church in Sardis, the church in Laodicea found itself wooed, enticed, and swept off its feet by the fabulous prosperity of the surrounding society.

It is important that we take careful heed to the Scriptures' warning concerning the dangers of wealth. First, wealth brings with it the danger of forgetting the LORD:

*Be careful that you do not forget Jehovah your God, failing to observe his commandments, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. <sup>12</sup>[Be careful] for fear that, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, <sup>13</sup>and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, <sup>14</sup>then your heart becomes proud and you forget Jehovah your God. (Deut. 8:11-14a)*

Second, wealth brings with it the danger of being seduced by material prosperity. In His parable of the seed falling on the various types of soil, the Lord Jesus describes the unfruitful seed in these terms:

*Still others are like seed sown among the thorns: these are people who have heard the word; <sup>19</sup>but the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the intense desires for other things come in and choke the word, and so it becomes unfruitful. (Mk. 4:18-19)*

The people whom our Lord compares to "*seed sown among the thorns*" are those who first view wealth as the means of solving their problems and providing them with security. Then, having accumulated wealth, and having attained a measure of (financial) security, these people now view wealth as the means of granting them fulfillment—their wealth now enables them to pursue "the good life" as defined by the world in the hopes of finding fulfillment. Such people fail to realize that the only true source of both security and fulfillment is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ and Him alone.

Note the total disparity between the church's self-evaluation (vs.17a) and Christ's diagnosis of her condition (vs.17b.) In terms of material possessions and earthly

wealth, the church might boast, *"I am rich; I ... have need of nothing!"* But Christ describes their spiritual condition before God in these terms: *"you are wretched and pitiable and poor and blind and naked."* Despite their material condition—indeed, because of it—they have become spiritually bankrupt and destitute; they are in a state of abject poverty before God. Compare this church's self-assessment (*"I am rich; I ... have need of nothing"*) with Jesus' teaching in Luke 12:16-21,

*And he told them this parable: The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop.<sup>17</sup> He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops."<sup>18</sup> Then he said, "This is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.<sup>19</sup> And I will say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'"<sup>20</sup> But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"<sup>21</sup> This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God. (Lk. 12:16-21)*

The dilemma confronting the church in Laodicea was very similar to that faced by the rich young ruler:

*As [Jesus] started on his way, a man ran up to him, and knelt before him, and asked him, Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? <sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? There is none that is good—except God. <sup>19</sup>You know the commandments, Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother. <sup>20</sup>[The man] said to him, Teacher, I have observed all these things from my youth. <sup>21</sup>Looking at him, Jesus loved him and said to him, You lack one thing. Go; sell whatever you have and give [the proceeds] to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. <sup>22</sup>But when he heard [Jesus'] counsel, his face fell and he went away filled with sorrow, because he was a man who had great wealth. (Mk. 10:17-22)*

This young man had the desire to inherit the kingdom of God. But in conflict with this, was the desire to make as his first priority the experience of the "good life" of this world. There was the desire, if possible, to have the best of both worlds, and there was a great reluctance to sacrifice either the present for the future or the future for the present. Here was the dilemma: An interest in the kingdom of God, but an addiction to the wealth of this world.

Let us beware of lukewarm Christianity, which thrives in a materially affluent environment. The Apostle Paul gives the following counsel to the church:

*Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God ...<sup>18</sup> Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and*

*willing to share. <sup>19</sup>In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves ... so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. (1 Tim. 6:17-19)*

### **III. Beware of Lukewarm Christianity, ...and Heed the Lord's Counsel**

The Lord's counsel to the church is to buy from Him those things that are necessary for her spiritual health—the items He lists in verse 18 correspond to the material items they trusted and cherished:

*"I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you may become rich." Although their bank accounts were filled with the wealth of this world, Jesus instructs them (and us) to invest in heavenly treasure:*

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. <sup>20</sup>But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal; <sup>21</sup>for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19-21)*

In practical terms, this means asking the Savior, "Lord, what do You want me to do for You?" and dedicating our everyday lives to Him, asking, "Lord, help me to do my everyday tasks for You as an act of service and devotion to You."

The Lord Jesus goes on to counsel the church in Laodicea, *"to buy from me ... white garments, so that you may clothe yourself and not allow the shame of your nakedness to be exposed."* He is exhorting them to dress themselves in the pure white garments of righteous living, instead of the woolen garments by which these people gained their fame and fortune. We are to cherish the value of righteousness, Christ's own righteousness and our conformity to that divine righteousness: *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled"* (Matt. 5:6.)

Then the Lord Jesus counsels the church, *"buy from me ... eye salve to put on your eyes, so that you may see."* What is stressed here is the importance of gaining understanding in the ways of God more than the ways of the stock market; the importance of having a proper perspective on the world and a clear focus on eternity. Jesus asks the question, *"What profit is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet he himself is destroyed or lost?"* (Lk. 9:25.)

Note that our Lord's counsel is costly: We must "buy" from Him the things we need for spiritual life and health. We must understand that the salvation provided by Christ is costly; it will cost us nothing less than our will and our soul:



*You do not belong to yourself; <sup>20</sup>you were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God with your body. (1 Cor. 6:19b-20)*

*[Christ] died for all, so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. (2 Cor. 5:15)*

The Lord Jesus made this demand of the rich young ruler: *“Go; sell whatever you have and give [the proceeds] to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me”* (Mk. 10:21.) We must also understand that what Jesus required of the rich young ruler in fact, He also requires of each of us in heart. In Luke 14:33 Jesus declares, *“In the same way, any of you who does not renounce all that he has, cannot be my disciple.”* The Greek term, ἀποτάσσω, translated, “to renounce,” has the meaning, “to say goodbye to,” or, “to leave behind.” In effect, Jesus is saying to each of us who would receive Him as our Savior and have a share in the salvation He offers: “Whatever I give you, hold with an open hand. If I choose to take it back from you, you must be willing to release it to Me. Be ready to say, ‘I can live without those things, Lord; but I cannot live without You!’”

Note, too, that our Lord’s command is an expression of His love: *“All those whom I love I rebuke and discipline”* (vs. 19.) It is an expression of divine love that we dare not take for granted or rebel against, it is one to which we must respond in submission, as our Lord commands: *“Be earnest* [as opposed to being lukewarm] *and repent”* (vs. 19b.)

Let us beware of lukewarm Christianity, and take heed to the Lord’s counsel. Whenever we have a craving for more of what this world has to offer; let us stop, let us ask God to give us more of Christ, and to give us what is best. Whenever we become dissatisfied with what we have; let us stop, let us thank God that He has met our needs, and let us thank Him for all that we have in Christ.

## **Conclusion**

Verse 20 describes a very peculiar and incongruous situation: the Lord Jesus Christ stands outside, at the door, seeking re-admittance into the life of His church and the hearts of His people. These Christian people, having become infatuated with the wealth of the world, filled their lives so much with the “good things” of the world that there was no room for their Lord and Savior—He was “squeezed out of one room after another” until He was finally “pushed out the back door!”

In all honesty, must we identify ourselves with the Laodicean church? Have we followed the pursuit of wealth and exhibited a life-dominating desire to attain and enjoy the “good life” as it is defined by the world? If the Holy Spirit causes us to see a reflection of ourselves in the Laodicean church, then may He also give us the grace to hear and to heed the Lord’s urgent invitation: *“Look! I am standing at the door,*

*knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him. I will dine with him, and he [will dine] with me" (Rev. 3:20.)*