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# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*“Connecting people with Jesus Christ so all can experience his love and joy.”*



### SERMON July 26: Letter to Laodicea, Revelation 3:14-22

This week is our last week on the 7 churches of Revelation. I have to say I'm disappointed it's finished. Personally I had a very good time really diving into these letters. I learned things I hadn't known before and got a much better sense of not only why the letters were sent to them, but also how it affects the church today, and each of us individually as believers. Today we look at the letter to the church at Laodicea.

In my experience, this church gets the lion's share of attention among the seven. There is this expression that somehow has struck a chord about being lukewarm. That God would rather them be hot or cold, but because they are lukewarm they will be vomited out of God's mouth. This is both intense and gross imagery. Which perhaps is why most times I hear this particular church get painted as terribly off track and ready for judgement. Yet truly they are no worse off than any of the others, though they share company with those that had not compliment but rather only criticism.

Because this particular church has a lot of attention given to it for the turn of phrase, I found it very interesting to look into the backdrop within the city and church that earned the phrase.

Laodicea, like all the others was located on the trade route we've been noting week to week. Like some of the others they were very wealthy as a city, and likely the Christians there were very well off and enjoyed wealth themselves. Like Thyatira, they specialized in textiles, but their wealth was likely greater because they were also a center for another industry. Banking. On a trade route, this would be particularly lucrative. Which points to the criticism that "you say you are rich, have acquired wealth, and do not need a thing."

Right off, let's once again make sure we are reading what is said, not hearing what is not said. This criticism is undergirded by multiple factors. Making a living isn't what is at issue here. Providing a secure future for one's family is not at issue here. To get a better picture of what is happening, we look to a couple interesting factors. We've noted that the Jews had a special dispensation to not participate in Roman worship. Specifically they were not expected to participate in the cult of the emperor, the worship of Caesar. Their longstanding monotheistic status set them apart from the other cultures conquered. This meant that they couldn't simply incorporate one more god into an existing pantheon. So they were excepted. Granted this conferred on them a lesser status in the empire, but they could still openly participate in life, business, trade, and so forth.

The earliest Christians were all Jews. This meant that so long as they had a critical mass of Jews that had converted, they were seen as a sect of Judaism, and therefore given the same protections and exceptions. Over time, however, the faith spread widely in the Gentile community. As this happened, the separation between Christian and Jew became more pronounced to the point that they no longer fell under the umbrella that would exempt them from being forced to worship Caesar as the other Romans did. This lifting of protection gave way to widespread persecution, which we've already looked at over the last few weeks frequently.

In Laodicea, there was a persecution that was particularly sharp to wealthy Christians who were once pagan and had converted. To be known as a Christian, to refuse to bow the knee to Caesar, meant you would also not be able to trade, buy, sell, etc. as everyone else did. This goes to the mark of the beast, which can be simply known as giving oneself over to Caesar, and not being able to buy or trade without it as noted later in Revelation. Which means that the wealthy Christian who stood firm and uncompromised now risked their wealth and their means to continue to amass it.

The one who takes great pleasure and pride in their wealth is told that in reality they are wretched, poor, blind, and naked. This statement is a bold one that very much contrasts the economy of the world with the economy of God. They had put their faith in the world's model of what makes for a successful life and individual. In doing so, they became spiritually bankrupt in God's economy. What made them stand out and the envy of others in the world made them at heart compromised and wretched, blind to their own spiritual folly, destitute in terms of "treasure in heaven", and we'll see soon where the naked comes into play.

But what was this lukewarm about? We can get the sense that there was a “wishy washiness” about them for certain. There is something more specific though given the context of the city of Laodicea. Likely what was happening is that they were trying to have it both ways, particularly so that they weren’t financially inconvenienced. In the course of their business, they would hide their faith and even go a step further and claim Caesar as divine so that they could continue in their wealth and material pleasure. In the presence of others believers they would reaffirm their faith. They did this dance back and forth constantly to try to have it both ways. They were neither on fire for Christ, nor opposed to Him. Some might express it that they would live for hell Monday through Saturday and claim heaven on Sunday morning.

What we do well to remember is that this trying to bounce between two worlds, which essentially renders their faith meaningless and worth little to nothing isn’t unique to this church. We’ve seen the same problem in the other letters. The only thing that is different is the trappings. Where others were led astray by false teachings from people trying to push Christians to become Jews or encourage them that they could be both pagan and Christian at the same time, in Laodicea they were tempted by something far more widespread, common, and even current and contemporary. They were tempted by money, comfort, and convenience.

What is also noteworthy is that, not unlike the problems the other churches were having, is that they weren’t even aware of their problem. For many, hearing this criticism was either a surprise, or a cause to get offended and deny. We looked in other letters at how insidious a false gospel is because it convinces the one who buys into it that they are still Christian even when in truth they have put their faith elsewhere. This is similar but different.

I suggest that this issue in Laodicea was at least in part because of cultural assumption built into the people from childhood on up. Wealth was part of the culture of the city. Along with this comes the natural tendency to measure one’s worth and status as a person with the size of the bank account, house, etc. If this is driven in through example and conversation, the assumption is that this is what is correct, and even naturally approved by God. So it’s not a hard jump to rationalize this back and forth between doing what is necessary to stay in a strong cash flow and continually reaffirming faith in Christ. One of the honest truths about faith is easily twisted here. As we try to avoid a condemning spirit we often say about others and sometimes even ourselves, “well God is the only one who knows the heart.” This can be a convenient out for a lukewarm faith. “Why do you play into the game of worshipping Caesar all week and then show up at church like nothing is off or wrong?” “God knows where my heart really lies.”

This letter to Laodicea puts the kibosh on that pretty quickly. Does God know the heart? Yes. Do our actions flow out of the heart? Absolutely. And God can’t be fooled. We can even fool ourselves, but not God. This letter puts that in sharp perspective. Let’s also not forget that we have our own cultural baggage to contend with. Over and over again we’ve been told that one of America’s greatest traits is that it is a place of opportunity. A place where hard work pays off, and where one can amass great fortune with enough hard work and perseverance. There is still a sense that wealth and status confer upon people a certain sense of respectability or at least gives them a louder voice. There are business tycoons that are renowned for their great wealth and even generous giving, yet the dirty deeds and sometimes even cruel or callous practices are whitewashed. Respect the amassing of great material wealth, but don’t look too much behind the curtain because that picture isn’t as pretty.

This is relevant because it is the temptation to allow that even here, today, there can be the temptation to do as the Laodiceans did. Not worship an emperor, something more subtle and therefore more likely to infiltrate the heart. The temptation is to separate faith and business into separate compartments. I can do whatever I need to do to get on top in my business, even if it’s shady or dishonest at best, ruthless and aggressive at worst. And I can wipe my hands clean of it every Sunday. Monday I start the cycle over again. The same lukewarm attitude in a slightly different context.

And no one can tell me otherwise. This is the great problem with being lukewarm. If we use the expression often connected with a strong faith, to be close to Christ is to be on fire. To be apart from him is to be cold. If something is cold, and it acknowledges it is cold, it can be open to being heated up. If something is lukewarm, it already has a little heat to it, and when the offer comes to truly get fired up, it’s easy to say “I don’t need that, I’m already warm enough”.

So what does the letter tell them they need to do to get back on track? It tells them to buy gold refined in the fire. So the criticism is they are too focused on their money and the answer is to go get more gold? No. This is another example of imagery. The gold is the character they are to strive for. The fire is persecution, hardship. They were compromised because they were avoided the persecution that comes from uncompromising faith in Christ. If they want to get back on track, they need to embrace the hardship. They need to put Christ first and foremost, above every other thing, knowing it will lead to some form of persecution. And yes, it will lead to their wealth being affected. But the depth of faith, the character, the reflection of the strength of Jesus is worth it. In fact, it’s where the true wealth lies. Jesus Himself says to store up treasure in heaven, fully knowing that the action and character this requires often limits how much treasure we’ll ever have here on earth.

It tells them to put on clothes of white. Forget the opulence and high fashion. Don’t worry about the quality of the accessories you were. They don’t have any lasting value. Rather, let your purity be what brings you beauty. Remember, this was an illustration in another letter. Clothes of purest white reveal a pure faith. In other words, stop compromising with the world. Stop trying to have it both ways. Go all in for Jesus, and that purity will be what makes us shine.

Finally it tells them to get salve for their eyes so they can see. In other words, get our perspectives straight. Get clear on what truly is of God, so that we can cut through whatever cultural mess has been laid at our feet and live fully for Jesus. We’ve talked about this many times here, which means to me that scripture has a theme that God doesn’t want us to miss. In every generation there are values and ideas passed along that carry us away from Christ. They are taught as good and correct, but have missed the point. So for all of us, we need something to help correct how we view these things. To make us more fully in communion with Jesus.

Which is exactly what the first note of their reward is if they are able to step out of their current situation and embrace life lived in the gospel fully. He says “I will come and eat with you”. You will have communion and fellowship with Me.

Right now, the door is locked from the inside, you’re not letting me in. But give your heart fully to Me and I will come to you, be with you. If we give ourselves to Jesus, we will ultimately be on the side that has victory over all. When God brings all things to redemption and reconciliation, when evil is destroyed, we will be with Christ who will reign over the Kingdom for all time. This is the reward.

These letters in Revelation all carry similar themes with them. While they are relatively short, and seemed a bit trapped in time, they are in truth seeing life in the long game, over the long haul. There is no backing away from acknowledging that a life of faith is hard. Overcoming culture that everyone else seems to be saying is correct, even though it runs counter to Christ, is hard. Dealing with the responses of friends and family when we refuse to compromise our faith is hard.

Rejecting the ideas of people coming with a twisted version of the gospel, who seem to be nice and have our interests at heart, is hard. All of these things lead to stresses and strains in a hundred different ways on our lives and in our hearts. But the discomfort is short game action. It only lasts for a little while in the grand scheme of eternity. So Revelation gives us a peek at the long run. In the long run, sacrifice and uncompromising faith bring about the best possible outcome.

Communion with God, forever in God's Kingdom, a very clear sense that God is pleased with us that will shine for all time. At the same time, this uncompromising faith yields great things in the short run as well. This kind of faith reveals the character that the world sorely needs to get its act together. Examples of love, grace, mercy, and compassion always serve to improve the world and leave behind a legacy of inspiration to others to do likewise. In the long run, there is no downside. This is the message to these churches in Revelation and to you and me today.

#### BIBLE STUDY July 29: Habakkuk 1

Today we begin the book of Habakkuk. This follows the book of Nahum which we finished last week. Nahum and Habakkuk are fairly close in terms of timing. Both of them are written in times of exile. Habakkuk is likely written in the 3rd deportation of the people of Israel, and this one specifically dialed in on Judah.

Habakkuk is also considered to be a contemporary of Jeremiah as well, who also warned of the same impending judgement on Judah. This reminds us that we are looking at a time when Israel had split and Judah was its own kingdom. They were living in an era when empires swept across large regions and divided nations further by carrying off some and leaving others behind.

In this instance, there were Israelites who were brought to Babylon, and some who were left behind. When opportunity came to return to their homeland, some of the Jews stayed where they were taken into captivity. If you hear the term diaspora, this is part of how this occurred. The diaspora essentially is the scattering of the Jewish people. This has happened multiple times throughout history, and so when we hear this, it is the repeated experience of the Jews being overtaken and drawn to different parts in the world.

Also noteworthy is the difference in tone between this book and Nahum. Nahum is entirely poetic in nature and as we saw is a venting celebration of sorts at the downfall of the Assyrians and the destruction of Nineveh. Habakkuk has an entirely different format and sense about it. This first chapter is not a poetic monologue. It is a conversation between the prophet and God. Interestingly, the venting Habakkuk does is not about the Babylonians who will come for Judah, it is anger at the community in which he lives.

Immediately he begins railing at God for allowing the behavior of his people to get so far out of hand. Habakkuk screams out about the injustice, violence, and wickedness he sees all around him. We get the sense that this isn't the first time he's gone to God about the situation at hand. "How long shall I cry for help?"

There is a desperation here. Over and over again, he asks God to intervene and correct the situation. Over and over again the request is met with silence, or at the least inaction. There is a hopelessness ringing right at the outset of this book.

Right off the bat we see some very startling and relevant realities at hand. The first is that this book acknowledges a very real human experience and condition. We ask and ask and seem to be just talking at the sky with nothing coming back to us. Sometimes we sit back with the cliché "we can't but God can." Yet in times like this, the question comes, and I think it is part of Habakkuk's problem, "what if God can, but God won't?" Maybe more importantly, the issue is more that we can but don't want to, so we put the responsibility on God.

This becomes a very real issue when things go sour. For example, in this opening chapter, it isn't that people can't change the situation. They can. Everyone has the potential to follow God and honor God's design, but not everyone does. This isn't about our lack of ability nor about negligence on God's part. It is about discerning what is correct and then following after it. God's longsuffering, which most of us are grateful for, in this instance is at the heart of Habakkuk's frustration.

We see time after time in scripture how God is patiently waiting for God's people to see the light and do what is right. In chapter 1 in a moment, we see that eventually that patience has an expiration date.

To continue on with these opening verses, however, we see another important detail. Part of his disgruntlement is that the open and unrepentant wickedness of his community negate the law, and ensure that justice is not served. Naturally, for the prophet who I would assume strives to follow the law and is passionate for justice, this is a sticking point. It also adds to wondering why God would allow this to go on for so long. If the law is in place specifically for God's people, and they are continuing to claim to be God's people, how can God tolerate this blatant hypocrisy? Rules not enforced and not followed have absolutely no power.

We see the same thing in Christianity today. People who want to claim the name of Jesus, yet don't want to actually give themselves over to Him. Claim the prize of redemption, but don't want to allow the Spirit to work transformation in the heart. It's become a broken record of sorts to hear people acknowledge that some of the meanest, unforgiving, selfish people warm pews each and every Sunday.

Wait staff across the country acknowledge that one of the worst service times is lunchtime on Sunday, and that some of their rudest most entitled customers just came from church. In other words, it doesn't matter what we claim with our mouths, it matters what we claim in our lives and living.

The Old Testament may be a different covenant, but one thing holds true in both Old and New Testaments. This sort of claiming one thing but really living another only lasts so long. In the Old Testament, we see a clear sense of judgment during their lifetime, which is actually a benefit because it gives time to turn things around. The Lord even says to Habakkuk that what God is about to do is going to happen in Habakkuk's own lifetime. The New Testament we don't see quite as active a role from God the Father in terms of raining down consequence. Which means that likely when the bill comes due it will be when we meet God face to face. This is an honest call to regular self-assessment and genuinely reading the gospels with an open and objective heart to see Jesus as He is, not Jesus merely as we've been told He is. So often the Jesus told is mired by other agendas or baggage and it is only in that honest study and conversation with other believers also seeking truth that we understand Him more and more clearly.

In the end, this first set of comments by Habakkuk says to God, "I'm angry, I'm frustrated, I'm frustrated at YOU, and this whole mess simply isn't fair."

Now note God's response. God doesn't scold Habakkuk for his rantings. There is no "how dare you come to me with that tone." If anything there seems to be an understanding of Habakkuk's anger and frustration. So God responds with what is to come.

In Habakkuk's time, judgment will occur. The Babylonians (some translations read Chaldeans) will swoop down on Judah to destroy. The imagery is fierce, intentionally so. There is no room to doubt that Judah doesn't stand a chance against this impending enemy. We see that God can use anything to send a message. Just because someone or something doesn't ascribe loyalty to God, it doesn't exclude them from being used by God for some purpose. The work of the prophet in the Old Testament is to help the people understand what is happening around them in the context of God and God's design. Habakkuk is given this insight in God's response.

In a wider sense, all of us can use this discerning spirit. When we look at the world around us, how do we see our circumstances and experiences? Do we look at them through the lens of God or do we look at them through some other lens? Do we ask "how do I see God at work in this circumstance?" Or do we ask things like "what can I get out of this? Who can I impress with this? What do I need to do to make the most benefit to me out of this?" The answer to this provides all of us with great insight into ourselves. What we look for is often where our heart is.

The more we can answer that we are looking for God's sense in the midst of our circumstances, the more likely we are keeping God at the center of who we are, and by extension avoiding making idols out of other things or people.

God's answer to Habakkuk is essentially that God is not blind to the problems in Judah, and is prepared to consequence them harshly. Habakkuk gets his answer, but isn't okay with it. He acknowledges God's greatness and purity. He acknowledges that the judgment is set. But he has a criticism. Not only has God been silent through the wickedness occurring to this point, but that wickedness has allowed the bad to prosper while the good fall victim to them. What should be has been flipped upside down. The good suffer while the evil succeed. Now that judgment is coming, rather than pick out the wicked and spare the good, the punishment is going to fall on everyone. "The enemy brings all of them up with a hook, he drags them out with his net". This to Habakkuk seems like one more layer of injustice. Allowing the Babylonians to run roughshod over all of Judah no matter who is in the way, and thereby paving the way for them to continue their rampage to the next territory doesn't seem like justice. Boldly Habakkuk lays this out before God.

I think this response tells us something about Habakkuk's relationship with God, and it is comforting. It isn't that Habakkuk has some level of brashness or disrespect for God. Clearly his statements about God's grandeur let us know that. What is at hand, I believe, is that his relationship with God is one where he feels comfortable laying his soul bare. He is able to be honest and vulnerable. This is something to strive for. To break down our own barriers, to get over ourselves for the purpose of being able to be completely truthful with our Creator. This spirit in reality isn't disrespect. It is the ultimate in respect because in order to get to this point we have to embrace that God loves us, wants to help us, wants us to grow, and knows that only way we can do that fully is to be truthful with God. Being truthful with God requires being truthful with ourselves, both in the good we achieve as well as the bad we are struggling to overcome.

This response also poses another question regarding guilt and innocence. There is clearly a sense that there are those who are trying to do right and those ignoring the right and acting very wrong. What we don't necessarily know is how that sorts out in percentages. Just how much of Judah had turned to overt and bold wickedness, and how much still clung to God? This becomes a relevant question both then and now.

It is relevant because it also leads to the question of how many people actually were actively trying to correct what was happening and how many people silently allowed it to continue. How many people stood against the wickedness and how many people accepted it and maybe even enabled it in some way? To this I turn us to Cain and Able.

Cain famously responded to God when God asked where Able was, "am I my brother's keeper?" The answer was a resounding "yes." Yes, we are responsible to watch out for one another. We are responsible to do something when we see injustice happen around us. We are not supposed to passively tolerate wickedness when it is boldly before us. We have a duty before God to keep one another. There can be a level of culpability in the wickedness around us, even if we're not being wicked. If we allow it, enable it, and even sometimes through our response or lack thereof, encourage it, how much guilt do we share in?

We don't know how this panned out in real time back then. The statements are specific in criticism but somewhat vague in terms of what the balance was between the good and the bad. I'm also not suggesting that we make excuses for why innocent people get swept up in the consequences of the wicked. Let's be clear, in moments like what is happening in Judah, there are always innocents who have to endure the same punishment as the wicked.

What is relevant, however, is that responsibility isn't always on the primary evil actors alone. The good around them has a responsibility to act in ways that try to correct whatever wrongs are being committed. Sadly, we also have to accept that evil that persecutes the good can persecute it even more by lumping them in when their consequence comes. It may not be an army. Perhaps it is a corrupt CEO whose company folds when they are found out for their misdeeds and hundreds or thousands lose their job. With our kids we see it often when the whole class gets punished for the behavior of a few. No, it isn't fair. Habakkuk's frustration is shared even today. Yet the reality is that when God is using a broken world to consequence, it's never going to be a perfect science. And yes, sometimes the good get swept up with the bad.

We are seeing another danger in this as well. Today in many circles the word "protest" has become synonymous with riot". The reality is that the vast majority of protests and protestors are peaceful. Nevertheless that are the relatively few bad actors who do incite violence and destruction. This becomes the focal point, and the message of the peaceful protestor gets lost as a consequence. Again, Habakkuk's frustration rises understandably.

I believe these harsh realities call all of us to a higher level of discernment. We need to discern to whom we attach ourselves in significant ways. When there is something wrong that stands out clearly in our midst we need to speak to it in a way that addresses it productively. Sometimes we need to part ways with people or places that we see are tearing the world and even ourselves apart or risk suffer whatever consequence is awaiting them. We need to self-evaluate and be honest in where we stand regarding the good and evil that is present in the world.

We don't live so much anymore in times of empires sweeping across the world terrorizing and conquering. These seem to be the consequences in the Old Testament as much as anything. Consequences look much different. Employment, relationships, membership in some club, team, or community group, finances, jail time, bad press, and such are much more present today as repercussions for bad behavior. Still, we find ourselves in Habakkuk's shoes wondering when something will intervene to correct wickedness run amok.

What we do well to remember is that even in the Old Testament, and certainly here, is that often God uses human vehicles to render divine judgment. Sometimes God may be calling us to address the evils of our day in proactive, productive fashion. That there is likely not Babylonian army sweeping over the land is a good thing. If one has the authority to deal with problematic people, rather than the axe of an army the scalpel of a surgeon can be used to deal with the specific and spare the innocent.

This helps ensure the fairness that Habakkuk sees eluding God's plan here. I think this first chapter also reminds us that because God is longsuffering, it gives us plenty of time to take action ourselves. I can almost hear the parental tone in

God's voice "take care of it yourselves, or I will, and you may not like how I go about it."