



## MINDING THE MERCURY

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February 28, 2010*

Today we are wrapping up our seven week study of the letters to the churches found in the book of Revelation. In the first week, we referred to them as wake up calls from Jesus, and I hope you have found them to be inspiring and motivational and encouraging for your own faith.

I was talking with Karin's dad about this series a couple weeks ago when we were in Chicago. He gave me this very knowing smile and said, "How's it going for you?" When he had been a pastor in California, his very last sermon series had been on these letters. And as we compared notes, we had to laugh because we both found the same thing to be true. When I'm looking ahead at a sermon series, I generally think I have an idea of what my main direction will be. But Revelation is full of surprises, and I would start out each week with one concept, only to discover different truths in the text than I had been expecting. And the same was true for him

That has happened time and time again for me with these chapters. That can be frustrating when you're wanting to nail down your three main points. But it's much more exciting and powerful when you allow the text to tell you where it is going rather than trying to force it into a box that isn't right for it.

I thought I knew what the letter to Laodicea was all about. I've heard plenty of sermons on it. It's probably the most preached on letter of the bunch. So I had a pretty good idea where I would probably take things. Then I read it again. And again. And once more, Scripture took my preconceived ideas and turned them on their head.

### **Revelation 3:14-22**

*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. 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.*

*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. 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.*

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

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

It's been 22 years, but I'm guessing some of you still might recognize this man. Eddie the Eagle was the face of ski jumping at the Calgary Olympics in 1988. It wasn't because he won any medals. It was because (how shall we put it nicely?) he was by far the least skilled jumper out there. Great Britain didn't have any ski jumpers, so it wasn't too difficult for him to qualify for the team. But he just wasn't very good. He was several pounds heavier than any other competitor. His thick glasses would fog up so badly he could hardly see. And he finished dead last in both of his events. The Italian press called him a "ski dropper" instead of a ski jumper. And the Olympic Committee promptly implemented what is referred to the "Eddie the Eagle Rule" -- ensuring that no one that bad could ever meet the standards again.

How would you like that to be your legacy? To forever be remembered in history for not being very good. And yet somehow, he captured the attention of the whole world. He's the only individual athlete who has ever been singled out in a closing speech at the Olympics. He was a torch carrier this year for Vancouver. In spite of or even because of his incredible weaknesses, people were pulling for him. Maybe because it's easier to identify with an underdog. We can see ourselves in the person on the outside.

There's a bit of a parallel between Eddie the Eagle and Laodicea. This is the worst church on the circuit. This is the only church Jesus says he wanted to spit out of his mouth. This is the only church described as wretched and pitiful. This is the only church that didn't get a single positive comment about how it was doing.

And yet there is something compelling about their story. Like I said, I think I've heard more sermons on Laodicea than any of the other letters. It's a very memorable chunk of Scripture. Everybody loves the hot and cold metaphor, and the famous verse about Jesus knocking at the door. For as bad as this church was, we still are drawn in to their letter. In part, I think because we can see ourselves in them and what they were going through. We resonate with their struggles. And ultimately, for as harsh as some aspects of this letter are, it is still a source of tremendous hope.

I love how it starts off:

*These are the words of the Amen.*

Seems kind of fitting to cap off the last letter with a big Amen. But "amen" in Hebrew doesn't mean, "the end." It means something to the effect of, "that's how it should be,"

or “so be it.” Saying “amen” when you hear a point you agree with is a way of saying, “This is true. This is solid.”

So when Jesus identifies himself as the Amen, he’s saying his is the real deal. One commentator said that Jesus is the one person who is in total conformity with reality. I like that a lot. In contrast to what’s going on in Laodicea, there’s nothing false or unreliable in him. He’s complete and whole. He’s the Amen. He says,

*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.*

Do you remember playing the hot and cold game as a kid? “You’re getting warmer...warmer...YOU’RE BURNING UP!!! Now you’re freezing.” Your temperature was a way to tell if you were getting closer or further away from the hidden object, so you would change direction accordingly.

The Laodiceans aren’t getting hotter or colder. They’re neutral. Because there’s no movement one way or another. They’re indifferent. They’ve stalled out in a dead zone and don’t seem to care. The church had fallen into this non-committal, passionless, passive Christianity with no fire at all. They were flat

Everyone can relate to getting a drink of lukewarm water. We know how unpleasant that can be, and we don’t really need any further definition of that sensation. But what does it look like to be lukewarm spiritually? How would I know if that’s me?

There are some signs we can look for to take a reading of our own temperature. Listen to the following statements and see whether or not they describe you.

*I am not inspired by conversations regarding the gospel.*

*I don’t like counting on other people.*

*I see myself as a “private” Christian.*

*I hang back from getting involved in any ministry.*

*I don’t feel a strong need for God.*

*I am unmotivated to pray or worship.*

*I put God out of my mind six days a week.*

*I am not all that interested in changing or growing.*

*I get concerned about anything that feels “too spiritual.”*

*I am uncomfortable talking about my faith.*

*I withhold affirmation from other people.*

*I never get around to seeking help I know I need.*

That is a tough list of questions to answer truthfully. At any given time, I’m sure at least some of those statements are true for me.

Hot and cold temperatures are such a good metaphor for Jesus to use, because the intensity of our living for Christ really does seem to shift by degrees. I can be more lukewarm or less lukewarm on any given day and in any given area of my life. And Jesus is telling the Laodiceans, “You’ve flattened out to an almost intolerable level. You just don’t seem to care at all one way or the other.”

Now here’s where the direction of this letter surprised me. I really thought that since the problem was that the Laodiceans were lukewarm, the word for them would be something like passion. It seems logical that the antidote for a cooled down faith would be to turn up the heat.

But there’s a difference between managing a symptom and curing a disease. Advil may help me reduce a fever, but what if the fever is not be the root of my problem? What if I have an infection? If that’s the case, painkillers will only mask the problem. I need an antibiotic to knock out that underlying cause.

Our lukewarmness is a symptom -- not the disease itself. There is a deeper cause behind it. So that means we can’t cure it by trying to whip up more enthusiasm for Jesus. It just won’t work. In the very next sentence of the letter, Jesus calls out what he sees as the root of the problem:

*You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'*

It’s a well established fact that Laodicea was a very wealthy city. They were a center of commerce in the Roman world. Here’s an example of just how much money they had. We’ve been hearing a lot about earthquakes lately and special relief funds to help in the aftermath. Laodicea had a big earthquake in A.D. 60, with lots of devastation. But they turned down financial assistance from Rome because they had enough money on their own to rebuild.

It was a very prosperous town. They had a big medical school there. They were famous for this extra soft black wool that they wove into textiles. They were the epitome of self-sufficiency.

That attitude had spilled over into their spiritual life as well. They felt good about themselves and didn’t feel like they needed anything. They were marked by a strong, independent spirit.

That’s great when it comes to making money or being successful in business. You need to be resourceful and innovative and not waiting on someone else to do things for you.

But nothing will cool down our spiritual temperature more quickly than an independent attitude. Because the entire message of salvation is centered in the fact that it all depends on God. We bring nothing to the table.

When I forget that I need God, I quit being thankful for how much he has done for me. I no longer appreciate the cost of the cross. I. When I lose sight of my own weakness, I don't care as much about God's power. When I think I'm fine on my own, prayer feels like an obligation instead of heartfelt worship of my Savior.

The word Laodicea needed to hear and the word we need to take to heart is **dependence**. We need to be a church that cultivates humility and the awareness that our very existence relies on the grace and mercy of God.

Jesus encourages the people of Laodicea to return to him as the source to meet their needs:

*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.*

As I said last week, Jesus knew each city he was talking to so well, and this paragraph is a great example. Laodicea's claims to fame were their wealthiness, their wool cloth and their medicine. Their doctors made use of a famous eye medication that was supposed to work wonders.

Jesus points to each of those centers of pride for them and says, "Guess what? You think you're rich, but you're poor. You need true wealth from me. You think you're so well-dressed, but you're naked and exposed before me. I can fit you with some real clothes. You think your ointments and lasik surgery are so incredible, but you're still blind as a bat. Come to me and I'll heal your spiritual eyes."

He nailed them to the wall in the very places they felt the strongest! That's what will trip us up and lead us toward lukewarm – the places in our life where we see ourselves as being the most strong and independent. So what are those places? To cultivate more dependence on God, that's where we'll need to start – the areas where we are currently the LEAST dependent on him.

Christ's word to the Laodiceans centered on three: Needs, shame and decisions. Those same three areas are where we're most likely to go solo. The first thing Jesus tells them is "Buy from me gold refined by fire." I would frame that in terms of the following question:

### **1. Where do I turn with my needs?**

When I am lacking resources, whether it is physical or financial or social, where do I go? What's my default?

Jesus makes this strange statement, "Come buy gold to get rich." It is ironic that he encourages them to buy anything when he has just told them they're poor. They've got

nothing to offer that Jesus needs. What are they going to give him in the exchange? Why doesn't he just say, "come to me and I'll give you some gold for free?"

What does it mean to buy from Christ? I think the price is in the going to him with our need. It is this sense of dependence we've been talking about. It costs us our pride to say, "Will you help me, Jesus?" We hand him our mistaken view of ourselves and he considers that a good trade. I like how Matthew Henry explained it. He said,

*Part with sin and self-sufficiency, and come to Christ with a sense of your poverty and emptiness, that you may be filled with his hidden treasure.*

When we're willing to go to Jesus with our need, he's ready to supply us completely. He says he'll give us gold refined by fire. That's gold that can be trusted. Gold that has been tested and is pure.

Other relationships and resources will eventually disappoint us. Whatever we put our trust in other than Jesus, whatever we find our security in won't last forever. Our intellect, our health, our friendships, our money, our jobs...they're all temporary. But we treat them as if they are 100% reliable. Our first instinct is to turn to them. We only go to Christ after we've exhausted our other avenues.

Christ wants to be our first instinct. When we do turn to him, he's always ready to be our supply. That can be in both physical and spiritual ways. How many of us here can think of a time Christ provided in a financial crisis when we had no means at our own disposal? He's the God of unlimited creativity and resources, so there is no end to the ways he can meet our material needs.

When you hear that, it sounds like that should be the easiest thing in the world to do. If we know God supplies, that's like having the magic password to get everything we need. Who wouldn't run first thing to him? But again, Jesus tells us to buy this gold from him. And before he just hands us what we ask for, he takes us through the furnace of faith. He stretches our ability to trust in him.

Because the wealth Jesus has in mind for us is spiritual, not material. He wants us to develop a rich faith that is solid enough to see us through difficult times. Peter says that's what is worth far more than gold. Knowing that when we are walking into our worst fears, we can count on him for strength and courage. When the stress of life is overwhelming, Christ promises peace to those who lean on him. When we feel completely alone, he will still never leave us.

What is it that you lack in this moment? Where do you feel poor? What is your strategy for filling that need? Christ invites us to come to him first and find a supply that is greater than our deepest needs.

In addition to gold, Jesus counsels the church to buy clothes from him to cover their shameful nakedness. It reminds me of Adam and Eve. When they first ate the forbidden

fruit and realized they were naked, they felt terrible about themselves, but they didn't know what to do. So they grabbed a handful of leaves to try and create a makeshift covering. If you've ever tried to make anything out of leaves, you know how easily they tear and how inadequate they would be as clothing. It is a pitiful scene when you think about it. And what does God do? In spite of their disobedience, he graciously replaced their flimsy, self-made rags with something more substantial that would provide warmth and protection and remove their humiliation.

As we think about how this piece relates to us, I think a second question to ask is,

## **2. What do I do with my shame?**

Shame is huge. Think of all the things you hope no one ever knows about you. The stuff we try to keep in the dark has tremendous power over how we think about ourselves and how open we are in our relationships. And like Adam and Eve, when we're feeling badly about who we are, we don't go running to God to help us. That's the last thing we want, because we can't bear the idea of him knowing everything. So we grab some leaves and do a patch job to disguise ourselves. We develop ways of covering up our shame. And it's not enough.

A couple weeks ago, I got an email from a friend who was describing a difficult time in his marriage from years ago. His business was failing and all the stress of the shame he felt over it was coming out at home. He was in counseling at the time, and in his email he wrote this:

*My counselor said I was subconsciously transferring my troubles to my wife. When I told him I wasn't doing that, he asked me, "What do you think subconscious means, dummy? It means you don't know you're doing it!"*

When we feel we have failed, we will sometimes do everything we can to diminish our affection for the one we love, so we can hurt less. Many people try to kill off their relationship with God this way, by choosing indifference. But the only way to break free from shame is submission to God and dependence on him.

For David, that meant subjecting his thoughts and feelings to God's scrutiny.

### **Psalm 139:23**

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.*

You could translate the Hebrew for anxious thoughts as "disquieting" thoughts. Things that bother me. Whatever disturbs me. It's also related to the Hebrew word for secrets. What is shame if it isn't our disquieting secrets? David invited God to search all that was going on in his heart and mind, to uncover any shame and stress.

When we do that, contrary to all our fears, we find he doesn't ridicule us or blast us. He jumps in to cover us and restore our dignity. Christ gives us those white robes that give us a new clean identity.

### **Romans 10:11**

*Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.*

Some people have the warped idea that God is a shaming God, always seeking to embarrass people for their mistakes. But he is a shame-removing God, a God who sees us at our worst and does not turn away. God is big enough to handle all our strongest feelings and he can help us move beyond them. Those raw nerve endings don't need to define us anymore. If I can bring myself to a place of admitting my need for something new and different from him, he will gladly begin to take me to a new place.

Without those feelings bottled up and blocking our path, that indifference in us can begin to melt.

Jesus gives one more piece of advice to the Laodiceans, telling them to buy eye salve so they can see. He says they are blind. When you're blind, and trying to walk somewhere, it's incredibly difficult to find your way. The value of seeing is being able to know where you're going. Christ's concern for the church was that they couldn't make wise choices.

This is a third area where we strive desperately to be independent. The question this letter confronts me with is

### **3. How do I find direction?**

Do I go to Christ when I'm facing a decision? I have to say, this is one of my greatest personal weaknesses. When I know in my head what I want to do, I don't want to get God's wisdom.

Many years ago, Karin and I were house hunting and we came across an older home we thought would be perfect. It was bigger than we thought we could afford. It had a great yard, and the neighborhood looked better than ours. We were ready to make an offer.

But since we hadn't bought too many houses, we asked my parents to come take a look. That was the worst torture and the best decision we made. Because they weren't as captivated by the charm as we were. They immediately noticed everything we hadn't seen, like the big cracks in the foundation and the questionable work on the addition. It wasn't the reaction we were hoping for. It messed with our plans. But they weren't trying to crush our dream – they were trying to prevent it from turning into a nightmare.

Inviting God into our decision making is like taking someone who loves you along on a house hunt. He sees the cracks we're blind to, and says, "This is not a safe, healthy place for you to live. You're my child. I want better for you."

Launching out on my own and ignoring what God has to say will gradually leave me lukewarm, because that's the epitome of indifference.

On the flip side, nothing revitalizes our faith more than when we depend on God for direction.

### **Proverbs 3:5-8**

*Trust GOD from the bottom of your heart;  
don't try to figure out everything on your own.  
Listen for GOD's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go;  
he's the one who will keep you on track.  
Don't assume that you know it all.  
Run to GOD! Run from evil!  
Your body will glow with health,  
your very bones will vibrate with life!*

The truth is, we all can find ourselves in the same place as the people of Laodicea. We can all become lukewarm. But Jesus offers us a way to regenerate our fire for him, as we relearn how to depend on him for our needs, our feelings and our direction.

Like I said, I've heard many sermons on being lukewarm, but I have rarely heard anybody talk about it from a very personal level until I met Jordy McCall. He has been refreshingly candid about his own struggles. And the change in his life is a powerful testimony to the way Christ transforms someone as they come to that place of dependence. So I've asked him to come and share a bit of his journey with you.

### **JORDY'S STORY**

Much more could be said about this letter, but I just wanted to wrap things up by rereading some of the final words of Jesus:

*Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.*

This is a love letter. Christ absolutely loved this church, in spite of their indifference toward him. And then he says this:

*So be earnest, and repent. 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 the time of the early church, nothing spoke of friendship and closeness more than sharing a meal together. This is the humbling and wonderful truth about Jesus: No matter how lukewarm and passive and flat we have been, the way is still wide open for us to return to not just an okay relationship with God, but a true friendship and intimacy.

He wants that. He's standing right here offering it. Are we ready to choose dependence?