

A Zealous Church

Revelation 3:14-22

Today we are going to finish up our Making Room sermon series by considering a passage (Revelation 3:14-22) that challenges us (as a church) to be zealous. Different ones of us will have different reactions to the idea that we should be zealous.

For some people, zealous has the connotation of being wide-eyed and out-of-control. Peter was a zealot and he would just as soon cut off your ear as reason with you. And so some of us will hear the challenge to be zealous and immediately think, "That's not me. And it's not healthy anyway."

Others will probably think, "It's about time we got some zeal around here!" For those who are excited about everything they do, zeal isn't scary at all; you believe that you're supposed to be zealous - especially about your relationship with Jesus.

Regardless of how you currently think about zeal, our passage makes clear that being zealous is for everybody. Zeal isn't restricted to any specific personality type (the quiet, behind-the-scenes person can be as zealous as the person who's "out there"). Zeal isn't dependent upon your gifting or your past obedience or even your circumstances. We're going to see that zeal is a function of your fellowship with Jesus Himself. And Jesus offers the same fellowship to every one of us.

Today we are looking at Revelation 3:14-22, the last of seven "letters to the churches." These seven letters were messages from Jesus to seven specific churches in Asia Minor in the first century. We're looking at the letter to the church at Laodicea because it stresses one of the core perspectives that we've been trying to communicate in this *Making Room* series. We've been talking about making room in our facilities and in our lives for people far from God, for children and youth, for worship and prayer. Instead of maintaining the status quo and being complacent, we believe God is calling us to be zealous for these things that are close to His heart.

Jesus' preference for being "hot" or "cold" (vv. 14-17) As with the other six letters to the churches, this letter begins with a description of Jesus (based on the vision found in chapter 1):

14 "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:

Because Jesus is "faithful and true" everything He says should be believed and obeyed. Calling Jesus "the Beginning of the creation of God" doesn't mean that He was created, but that He is the origin of creation. As such, Jesus has all authority. Jesus is specifically concerned about their "deeds":

15 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 16 'So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

Paul was always eager to communicate that a person isn't saved by deeds/works; our salvation is based solely on the death and resurrection of Jesus. But he was also eager to communicate that we were "created in Christ Jesus for good works. . ." (Ephesians 2:10). We express our love and devotion to God (partially) through good works.

Jesus' evaluation of the church at Laodicea was that when it came to their deeds (the things they were actually supposed to do for God) they were neither hot nor cold; they were lukewarm. "Lukewarm" is an image of complacency.

Jesus preferred that they be either hot or cold. This image doesn't suggest that being "hot" signifies commitment to God whereas "cold" signifies that you have no spiritual interest. When it comes to a drink, a hot drink can be good (like hot chocolate on a cold winter night) and a cold drink can be good (like iced tea on a hot summer day). I realize that some people like lukewarm drinks, but in this imagery if you're lukewarm you used to be hot and you've cooled off. . . or you used to be cold and you've warmed up. Either way you're not what you're supposed to be.

This would be like going to the kitchen sink and filling up a glass with what you think is cold tap water, but because someone has recently run the hot water it's actually lukewarm. You take a big gulp and your your instinctive response is to spit it out. That was Jesus' reaction to the church at Laodicea. Jesus didn't hang on the cross and bear our sins on His body so that we might be lukewarm. He went to the cross so that we would love God passionately.

The Laodiceans were not only lukewarm, they were also deceived.

17 '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,

Laodicea was a very affluent city. Affluence has a tendency to mask a person's (or a church's) spiritual condition. Like the rich man in Jesus' parable who said to his soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry," the church at Laodicea was smug and self-confident. They said, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," when in fact they were wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

Their example should be a warning to us - a warning not to fall into the trap of affluence. It doesn't have to happen, but affluence and complacency often go hand in hand. Quite honestly, there are temptations that come with new buildings and improved facilities. There is the temptation to say, "Now that we've got this nice/new facility, we can sit back and take it easy. We don't have to seek God like we used to. . ." If we're not careful,

we can become smug and self-confident. We've heard of churches that have gone from being people-centered and God-centered to being building-centered. It's an easy trap to fall into.

Like we've said from the beginning of this effort, what's the point in "making room" in our facilities if we're going to fill it full of lukewarm people? Why not heed this warning and say, "By the grace of God, we will not become lukewarm and complacent. By the power and Spirit of God, we will be passionate about people far from God, about children and youth, about worship and prayer."

In verses 18 and 19 we see **Jesus' challenge to "be zealous and repent"** (vv. 18-19) It's encouraging that Jesus didn't condemn and reject the church at Laodicea. Rather, He confronted them and then invited them to receive from Him everything that they'd need to avoid being luke-warm and self-deceived. Jesus tells them, "In light of the fact that you think you're rich when you're really poor and wretched. . ."

18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

When He said, "Buy from Me gold. . . garments. . . and eye salve. . ." Jesus echoes Isaiah 55:1 in which the Lord invites the people to "Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without cost." In the same way, we "buy" gold, garments, and eye salve from Jesus without money and without cost. We simply receive them as gifts of grace.

These three items reflect three things upon which the city of Laodicea prided itself. First, Laodicea had great **wealth** (it was a center of banking and industry). "Buying gold" from Jesus is a metaphor for being rich in the ways that really matter - rich in soul and rich toward God.

Second, Laodicea had a thriving **textile industry** which was especially famous for its black wool fabric used to make clothes and carpets. By contrast Jesus offers "white garments" - symbolizing righteousness and purity in the book of Revelation - "so that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed." Basically Jesus is offering to replace the shame of their spiritual nakedness/barrenness with righteousness and purity.

Third, Laodicea boasted of a **medical school** and a medicinal "powder" used to make an eye-salve (which was exported around the world). But Jesus offers spiritual "eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see." As we've already seen, they were spiritually blind and complacent; they thought they were rich and well-off, but they were poor and miserable. Jesus offers each of us spiritual clarity - the ability to see things as they really are. (For historical references, see Mounce, p. 126; Ladd, p. 66).

This is a standing offer to each of us. If we find ourselves complacent and self-deceived, all we have to do is receive from Jesus these gifts.

19 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

It's so easy to misinterpret the discipline and correction of the Lord. If you grew up in a family where you were punished instead of disciplined when you messed up, you might have a terrible time believing that God isn't trying to punish you for being luke-warm and complacent. God could punish us if He so desired; but His compassion and His covenant faithfulness compel Him to do the deeper work of disciplining/training us. Barclay makes this observation: "It is the fact of life that the best athlete and the finest scholar receive the hardest and the most demanding training" (cited in Mounce, p. 128).

You can probably identify ways in which God has been disciplining you. You might have read a Scripture lately that surfaced some area of your life that needs maturity. I recently read a psalm (Psalm 111) that stopped me in my tracks and made me realize how self-absorbed I often am (instead of being absorbed with God and His works). Or God might be disciplining/training you through your circumstances. You might be in a situation in which God is telling you, "Unless you trust Me here, you aren't going to make it." He's training you in the ways of faith. To recognize God's discipline is to recognize God's love. He loves us so much that He doesn't leave us alone to do the best we can in our own power.

How should we respond to His discipline? "Therefore be zealous and repent." If you repent, you go a different direction. You don't merely feel bad; you don't wallow in your guilt. You actually turn and go a different direction. If you repent of being complacent and lukewarm, you become zealous. If you're zealous, you live like you mean it. You are passionate, fervent about walking with God.

Understand that this is a command, something that we're supposed to do. We don't repent and become zealous in our own strength, but our wills need to be engaged. The encouraging thing in this letter is that Jesus quickly follows up His command to "be zealous and repent" with an offer of fellowship.

Jesus' offer of fellowship (vv. 20-22) If you've never heard verse 20 before, get ready for the most amazing offer you've ever heard in your life. This is what Jesus says to the lukewarm church at Laodicea and to each of us:

20 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.

Imagine your kitchen table (or wherever you eat your meals). Imagine that when you show up for Sunday dinner that Jesus Himself is sitting there enjoying a meal with you. He's also there for supper. . . and for breakfast. . . and lunch tomorrow. . . Imagine that Jesus lived in your house and sat at your table and ate your food! Can you imagine Jesus being that "at home" with you? That's exactly the type of natural, easy, ongoing fellowship He's offering. Table fellowship meant acceptance and relationship.

All you have to do is “open the door” - say to Jesus, “I want that type of fellowship with You.” You open the door initially when you put your faith in Jesus, and you keep opening the door throughout your life (not that Jesus leaves your life; it’s more a matter of continuing to accept this offer of fellowship).

The implication is that our zeal and repentance will come from being in His presence - and not from some type of hyped-up commitment. In other words, His fellowship is what makes a person zealous and repentant.

Deborah Smith Douglas grew up in Harvey County, Kansas. She gives an image in *The Praying Life* that helps us understand how fellowship with Jesus can make us “zealous.” She describes her childhood memories of seeing farmers burning their fields. She remembers the green growth coming up through the charred stubble. She sees this annual ritual of burning fields as “a powerful image of the dynamic, transforming mystery of fire” - really the transforming mystery of fellowship with Jesus - who came to baptize us “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11).

There is, I imagine, in each of our lives a considerable acreage of stubble. Fields that once were green with hope, ripe with promise, lie blighted or barren. Sorrow, death, betrayal, disappointment; broken dreams in public and in private life, in our families, our work, our churches. The cumulative effect of inner and outer loss can leave us feeling that we live permanently in rural February, surrounded by blunt, stubbed fields as far as the eye can see. . . . Nevertheless, we can catch fire. We can run like sparks through the stubble. . .

Being totally changed into fire [i.e., being zealous] is neither complicated nor difficult. It is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived and celebrated. If we wish, God’s fire can happen to us. If we want it, it *will* happen to us. Perhaps God will open our eyes and we will see that it *has* happened to us.

If we get close enough to the fiery heart of God, the white-hot refining fire at the center of the vortex, we will catch fire ourselves. We will not worry about how to share it with others. As a friend of mine once pointed out to a gathering of people fretting about the ways of sharing Christ with others, if you are in love, you cannot hide it. If you are pregnant, it will show. (*The Praying Life*, pp. 96-99)

When you’re in fellowship with Jesus, even the stubble of your life can fuel zeal. That stubble can be the very thing that Jesus ignites and the thing that burns the brightest for Him. If you’re a person who tends to think, “Zealous is a word that could never describe me. . .” then take heart. Your zeal isn’t a function of how energetic or revved-up you are; it’s a function of your fellowship with Jesus. If you dwell in the presence of Jesus, He will set you on fire and make you zealous in a way that’s compatible with who you

are and where you've been. Zeal fueled by fellowship with Jesus will be "humble and gentle in heart" because it's been learned in fellowship with Jesus. That type of zeal doesn't wear a tee shirt that reads, "I'm the Christian that the devil warned you about. . ."

Verse 21 looks forward to the day when Jesus establishes His kingdom fully on earth.

21 '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.

This is an encouragement on a lot of different levels. In the book of Revelation "he who overcomes" is the person who remains faithful to God even in the midst of persecution and distress. Being zealous and being in fellowship with Jesus doesn't mean a life devoid of trouble. It means thriving in the midst of trouble. The promise is that those who overcome will one day reign with Jesus.

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

The fact that Jesus says that the Spirit is speaking to the **churches** (plural) suggests that these letters to the church have relevance beyond the specific church being addressed. This is really an assumption behind all the letters/epistles in the NT (that they are relevant to other churches in other times/cultures). God wants us to hear the Spirit saying these things to Faith E Free in Manhattan, Kansas in 2011.

I wanted to teach this passage to conclude our *Making Room* sermon series because it brings into focus the heart of this effort. Six weeks ago I pointed out that it's a serious thing for a church to ask you to give your hard-earned money to "make room" in our facility, but that's it's an equally serious thing to make room in our lives for the things that God cares about.

It's a serious thing to ask you to make room in your life and be zealous for people far from God. Instead of being lukewarm in relation to your friends and neighbors and coworkers who need the life that only Jesus offers, we should be zealous to invite them into our fellowship and into a relationship with Jesus.

It's a serious thing to ask you to be zealous for the spiritual growth and health of our children and youth. We believe that God is calling many of us to invest our lives in children and you "like we mean it." It's a serious thing to ask you to be zealous about worship and prayer. We don't want to be lukewarm in our worship on Sunday mornings or throughout the week. God wants us to worship Him in Spirit and truth - like He's really worthy. We don't want to be lukewarm in our prayer - as if it's a drag and a drain on our busy lives. We want to be passionate about pouring out our praise and thanksgiving and petitions to God.

Since God is zealous about these things, we should be zealous about these things also.