

Laodicea
"Grace for Nausea"
11/19/97
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Evangelist Bill Fay often asks a very telling question when he is talking to people about Christianity.

After the person says what he believes about Christianity, Bill asks, "If what you believe is not true, would you want to know it's not true?"

Interestingly, some people pick up on the point of the question very quickly and in a burst of honesty say, "No."

What they are saying is, "The truth about Christianity doesn't matter to them because frankly it is all quite irrelevant to them."

Their allegiance to a religion is of the same kind as their allegiance to a sports team - it's convenient, it's socially acceptable, it demands little, and it doesn't make much difference in their lives.

It is such people Jesus addresses in the letter we look at today.

If ever a letter demanded a response, it is this letter before us.

The description of the problem is in graphic, even earthy language and the call to take action is clear and precise.

If you read the text with any intellectual honesty at all you have to ask, what is the author saying to me and what is my response.

Have you ever written a letter to someone with the purpose of challenging something they had said or done?

Maybe they did something to offend you or someone you care about.

Maybe they didn't do something they should have done.

And you wrote to them to correct them, to challenge them, to rebuke them - to ask them to make something right and do it differently next time.

I think that usually when we write such a letter we try to soften the criticism by saying something pleasant or affirming as we begin the letter.

Before we tell them their honesty was hurtful maybe we tell them we appreciate their candor.

Before we tell them their actions were wrong we tell them how much we appreciate how hard they tried.

We attempt to soften the criticism by an affirmation.

But this letter doesn't do that.

It gets straight to the awful truth - like a slap in the face, it gets our attention.

After introducing himself, Jesus gets right to his opening point:

READ Vv15-16 "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."

There you have it!

Not very pretty, not very gentle, not couched in softer language.

Jesus says, I feel like spitting you out of my mouth - the translators couldn't bring themselves to say what Jesus actually said, "I am about to vomit you out of my mouth."

What is it that nauseates Jesus?

Spiritual lukewarmness!

Do you know what a veneer is?

In furniture it is the thin layer of fine wood that covers the coarser wood beneath.

In people it is a thin disguise of respectability or religiosity that hides a different interior.

What nauseates Jesus is people with a veneer of Christianity.

People for whom Christianity doesn't make much difference.

Its tempting to assume Jesus is talking about people other than us, isn't it?
But isn't there, in you as in me, at least some desire to find out for certain?

Jesus' words are rather offensive.

Do you suppose he meant them to be, in order to get our attention?

A minute ago I used the metaphor of a veneer on a piece of furniture to describe what makes Jesus sick to his stomach.

Jesus actually used different metaphors: hot and cold and that awful in between - lukewarm.

Hot is good, even warm to almost hot is good.

Cold is good, even cool to almost cold is good.

But there is an in between that is nauseating.

Jesus knew his readers would know what he was talking about.

They lived in a city with no close-by water source.

Their water had to be piped in from several miles away.

The closest source was the hot spring at nearby Hieropolis.

But by the time the water ran through the pipes, exposed to the middle-eastern sun, on its way to Laodicea, it was probably lukewarm.

I couldn't find this out for certain about the springs that fed Laodicea but sometimes hot springs have a sulfur, rotten eggs, smell.

If you ever driven past Pagosa Springs in the southern part of our state or driven through some of the springs of Yellowstone Park you know the smell of which I speak.

Whether it was just lukewarm water or lukewarm water with a sulfur smell, Jesus knew they would understand when he spoke of something that makes you sick to your stomach.

But obviously these were metaphors - describing what?
 What made Jesus want to throw up?

People who are lukewarm toward Him.

I struggled for some time in my study attempting to determine if Jesus' remarks were aimed at people in the church who call themselves Christians when they aren't or aimed at people who are Christians but who just aren't serious about their faith.

I concluded that Jesus probably has both in mind.

For the same rebuke is appropriate to both and the call to action is the same for both. We'll look more at that in a few minutes.

When Jesus says that some in the church are "lukewarm" what does he mean?

The answer is found in the following parts of the letter:

Vv17 READ "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."

They have the trappings of being Christians and they think they are doing well as Christians but they don't have a real relationship with Jesus.

They are lukewarm in that they have taken on some degree of Christianity - they call themselves Christians,
 they attend Christian religious services,
 they do some of the things Christians are supposed to do -
 but they haven't gone all the way -
 they have not come in abject humility to gain what only Jesus can give -
 a relationship with Himself.
 They haven't sold out to Jesus and yet they are convinced they are OK.

This was a people who kind of had it all together.

When it came to living in the “real” world, they weren’t dependent on God.

They saw themselves as self-sufficient.

Why then did they call themselves Christians?

Maybe for the same reason some do today?

They wanted enough of Christianity that they could claim to be on the right side if the end turned out the way some said it would but they didn’t want so much Christianity that it would interfere with the way they wanted to live their lives in the here and now.

It really didn’t matter if they had Christian friends because discussion of spiritual things made them uncomfortable.

Reading the Bible as God’s letter to them was something they didn’t think about.

Prayer, evangelism, and world missions were mostly irrelevant.

Occasionally they would give a few dollars for good causes but not out of any conviction.

To be truthful they get irritated when anyone in the church talks about money.

They’d rather have kidney stones than intentionally show up for a prayer meeting.

They are able to sit through sermons about living for Christ but it has no place in their lives when it comes to business, leisure activities, and investments.

Their assessment of themselves is that they don’t have any need that they can’t take care of themselves.

They don’t actually need God except in some mystical sense of everybody needs a little divine help -something like luck.

These are the men and women who sit in our churches Sunday after Sunday who have never admitted their real need for a Savior - and have never turned in repentance and faith to Jesus.

But Jesus' words are not only to the person who comes to church but isn't actually a Christian but his words are also to some who truly are Christians.

For some of us, somewhere along the line we slid into a complacency, a dullness, a grayness about our relationship with Jesus.

Spiritual power is lacking in our lives but we don't care anymore.

Revival doesn't come to our own souls, to the church or the community but it doesn't really matter.

Hundreds around us don't know Jesus but it is not a priority with us.

Our relationship with Jesus has been on hold for years and our spiritual life is at best lukewarm.

How common is this story in our church?

As a young man at school, he was a faithful Christian, eager to witness, disciplined in his devotion to Jesus Christ.

He went off to college where his faith was strengthened as he shared fellowship and ministry with other Christians.

He graduated and moved on to a profession and up the promotional ladder.

Out came the attaché case and smart suits;

up went his mortgage and lifestyle;

down went his trust in the Lord as he managed more and more income;

and out went his time with God's people.

Now he can help the Lord with his new money and influence...

His enthusiasm for Jesus is neither hot nor cold.

(Kelshaw - 169)

We become blinded to our real need by our apparent lack of need.

Material wealth gets confused with spiritual wealth and God's favor.

Doctrinal correctness is confused with spiritual life.

We are being blessed thus we must be right and all must be right with God.

Jesus makes an interesting observation when he says he wishes we were either cold or hot rather than lukewarm.

Does he mean it would be better if we were cold?

Apparently in Jesus' mind, spiritual "coldness" was preferred over lukewarmness.

There is more hope for the openly antagonistic person than for the lukewarmly indifferent.

Jesus always found that the openly sinful were more responsive to the gospel than the self-righteous.

The hardest person in the world to help is the one who is convinced he has no need.

But Jesus says you lack the one thing that is most important in life: a relationship with him.

The former CEO of Chrysler Corporation, Lee Iacocca, who turned it around financially, wrote in his book entitled Straight Talk, "Here I am in the twilight years of my life, still wondering what it's all about...I can tell you this, fame and fortune are for the birds."

Jesus would say, "That's right. V18 "The real riches you need, the forgiveness of sins and righteousness you need to wear to stand before a holy God, and the ability to see your need and the savior can only come from me."

As I said earlier, the people of Laodicea were apparently relatively affluent but Jesus says you are poor beyond description and what you need is the wealth I can give you - richness toward God.

Not only were the Laodiceans affluent but they were known for the wool they grew on their sheep and processed in their city.

But Jesus says that in spite of your fine clothing you are spiritually naked and you desperately need the covering of forgiveness and righteousness that I alone can give you.

And not only that, but although you are famous for your eye clinics and medicines you are blind to the truth about yourselves and you need the sight that I provide.

Up to this point Jesus words have been sharp and indicting. But at verse 19 the motive behind Jesus' rebuke comes shining through.

Like a father who truly loves his children enough to discipline them so Jesus says his rebuke and disciplinary words are because he loves us.

If Jesus is who we say he is, isn't it remarkable that he would care about what happens to us?

Why would Jesus care about those who are lukewarm toward Him?

Some would audaciously say that it is God's job to love and forgive.

But I would say it is God's job to serve justice - love and forgiveness are the unexpected overflow of his mercy and grace.

That he yet reaches out to any of us who have been for so long only lukewarm, half-hearted, indifferent to Him - is almost unbelievable.

And yet look at Verse 20:

"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."

I used to join with those who have said this verse is used out of context if it is used to offer salvation to an unbeliever.

But oh have I changed my mind.

I am convinced that this offer is made by Jesus to both the Christian and the one who is not a Christian.

The offer is as broad as the need.
For Jesus summarizes a great theological truth in this simple invitation.

Lukewarmness can be overcome only one way - by a true and intimate relationship with Jesus Christ.

And Jesus says he's ready if we are.
That blows me away!

Look again at the beginning of this letter:
V1 "These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation."

Jesus describes himself in two ways.

First, the word "amen" means "so it is".
It indicates that what has just been said is absolutely correct - it conforms completely with reality.

The next words confirm that first description:
"Faithful and true witness" refers to what is completely reliable.

For Jesus to refer to himself as the "amen" is to indicate that he is the last word - who he is and what he says and does is perfectly right and unchanging.

Secondly he describes himself as the ruler or originator of God's creation.

Here is the creator, sustainer, and ruler of the universe, who is himself, the unchanging, completely reliable and perfect expression of all that is right and good saying to you and to me - "I want to have a relationship with you."

Jesus said, "I will come in and eat with him and he with me".
In the ancient world to eat in a person's home was evidence of affection, confidence and an intimacy of relationship.

It is to be loved, and known, and cared for, and protected and given purpose - to become fully human as God intended.

If he is who he says he is, isn't it logically ridiculous to refuse?
If this is his offer isn't it spiritual suicide to resist?

Half-hearted, lukewarm, indifferent, complacent Christianity makes no sense at all.

If Christianity is true then it is impossible to be too enthusiastic about it.

Lukewarmness is not partially right - it is totally wrong.

I am planning to call for a response this morning - a response that means you make a decision and act on it today.

And while the message applies to all ages and both genders -
I'm addressing myself primarily to men today.

What I have said I think applies most particularly to men because I think men are more prone to a pride that makes it difficult for them to admit a need - at least to admit a need of the proportion that I have described today.

We, men, will admit our need for a little help to augment our own ability - but to admit total, complete, helpless without intervention need is a different thing.

What am I asking men to admit today?
That Jesus hasn't meant much to them.

There might have been a time when we were devout in our relationship with Jesus, zealous about service but we have grown lukewarm - we just don't care anymore.

The remedy?

The first step is to admit our need.

It's like a doctor who has described your condition for months and every time asks you to sign the release that allows him to do surgery - but each time up until now you have walked out of the office without signing - even though you know it has to happen.

Today I want you to sign the release.

Today I want you consciously, deliberately, make your move - Today you turn to Jesus Christ.

You stop trying to convince yourself that you are ok the way you are.

You agree with God that, on your own, you won't ever be good enough for God and that you need what he alone can supply - forgiveness and life eternal.

How many men will spend eternity in hell because they were too proud to admit they weren't Christians after years of pretending they were?

Oh God break through such pride!!

Or today if you truly are already a Christian, do you recognize that you must stop the spiritual slide that has been going on in your life for months or years.

You recognize that your relationship to Jesus Christ has been on hold for years - that your spiritual life is at best lukewarm - rather nauseating to you and certainly to God.

And today you recognize that you are in dire need of his gracious intervention - you can't make it on your own.

You'll never be a good enough Christian - you've tried so many times and failed so miserably - you need Jesus' intervention in your life to turn you around - to give you spiritual light and health.

Are you ready to humbly admit you can't fix it - you bring nothing to the table but a willing heart.

I expect a miracle in this place this morning.

For nothing short of a miracle will change minds and hearts.

I expect a miracle in this place this morning.
Because nothing short of miracle is what we need to turn around and live in relationship with Jesus.

Someone asks, "What will I have to do if I have that kind of relationship with Christ?"
My answer: That is not the proper question. If you are still confident enough in yourself that you can bargain with God - then you don't yet know how desperate you are.

Someone asks, "Will I become some kind of fanatic if I have that kind of relationship with Jesus?"
My answer: Wrong question again. The issue is do you realize how destitute you truly are so that you will trust Jesus no matter what?

To have a relationship with Jesus we come with no conditions, no bargaining, no bartering, nothing in our hands or thoughts with which we think we can guide the relationship - we come totally dependent on him, falling at his feet, wholly at his mercy, giving up and captured by his love.

We're not talking about a program to follow, we are talking about a relationship established.

Jesus says, open the door and I will come in.

Are you ready?
Are you done with lukewarm?