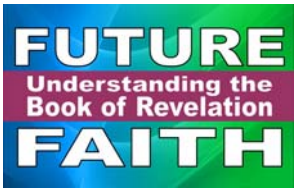

THE TEMPTATION OF TEPIDITY

Future Faith (Part 7)

Text: Revelation 3:14-22

This message was provided by Christ Church of Oak Brook and
Love Changes Life, the broadcast ministry at Christ Church of Oak Brook.

I

A certain young man finally worked up the courage to propose marriage to the girl of his dreams. Dropping to one knee, he looked his beloved in the eye and said: "Sue, I know I'm not *wealthy* like Waldo. I recognize that I'm not as *wise* and well-educated as Waldo. I may not be as *warm* and handsome as, say, Waldo. But I love you Sue." The woman, obviously moved, responded sincerely: "Why I love you too, honey. But tell me a little more about *Waldo*!"

There is something of all of us in that woman Sue, I think. There is this desire to both invest ourselves deeply in one place, and yet remain open to the possibility of even better options. This reality may be especially problematic when it comes to matters of the spirit. For those of us who call ourselves "Christians," there is within us a genuine impulse that draws us toward Christ – a desire to know him more deeply, to surrender ourselves to his character and commandments, to bind ourselves to him with all the chords of our being. What makes that so hard to do, however, is the knowledge that there are other options out there – other places to which we might go to find the wealth, the wisdom, and the warmth that all of us seek.

Long ago, in a place called Laodicea, there lived a people who also struggled to find their way in this regard. What made it so hard for them – as it still is for many of us -- was the enormous appeal of that which competed with their devotion to Christ. If you were looking for <u>wealth</u>, for example, Laodicea was certainly one place to find it. Situated on the great highway that ran from the civilizations along the Euphrates River to the east out to the City of Ephesus and the Aegean Sea to the west, Laodicea had become by the middle of the First Century a tremendously prosperous commercial and banking center. So affluent were its citizens that when an earthquake leveled much of the city in A.D. 60, the Laodiceans proudly declined the disaster relief package offered by Rome, choosing instead to pay themselves for the rebuilding of the city.

If you sought <u>wisdom</u> to help handle the pains and problems of life, there again, Laodicea had much to offer. The city prided itself as a visionary leader in the arts and sciences. Alongside fine schools, it was particularly renowned for its state-of-the-art medical center – associated with the cult of Aesclepius, the God of Healing. Amongst other products, this center made an ophthalmic powder for diseases of the eye that people came from far and wide to procure.

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And Laodicea was also the place to find warmth – at least of the physical kind. The city was regarded as having one of the finest textile industries anywhere around. It's signature creations were glossy black woolen fabrics widely touted for their softness and style. When it came to haberdashery, the Laodiceans were among the trendsetters of their day.

II

This is why, I suppose, it must have been so very difficult for the Christians in that culture to give themselves wholeheartedly over to Christ. After all, when you are confronted daily with so much in the way of the world's version of wealth, wisdom, and warmth, it is admittedly hard not to be attracted to it. It can become easy to tell ourselves that we're still very interested in Christ, while giving more and more of ourselves over to pursuing the cultural equivalent of "Waldo." Clearly that had happened at Laodicea, 'though we can't say for sure how that reality manifested itself.

Maybe they still nodded thoughtfully at those Bible passages about giving a tenth of their income to God's work or storing up treasures in heaven; but, when it came right down to it, more than 90% of their resources got invested in the wealth of this world. Perhaps the Laodiceans still talked faithfully about the importance of studying and sharing God's Word; but what was on their minds on their lips much more of the time was the wisdom and news of the world. Maybe they still told themselves that their real identity and security lay in the promises God had made to them; but they were warmed even more by the comments people made about how they dressed and looked.

Because I live in a fishbowl, I can't throw stones at the Laodiceans. It had to be hard for them, as I know it is still is for us, to be honest about where their greatest loyalty lay. We genuinely want to honor our relationship with God. Yet we know that as we take hold of and use the tools of worldly prosperity, there is always the danger that we will increasingly come to care more for them than we do for the greater wealth, wisdom, and warmth that only God can give.

When this happens, a person rarely chills on God completely or goes cold altogether to his or her original faith. He or she might continue to be active in a church and claim to be a Christian. But neither does he or she continue to live with the hot passion that characterizes a wholehearted commitment to Christ. That person simply becomes a *tepid disciple* – lukewarm in sin and in righteousness alike. This is what had happened to many of the Laodicean Christians, and it helps explain what Jesus says to them: **"I**

know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. How I wish you were either one or the other!

III

Christ's desire, of course, is that every Christian be "hot" --on fire for him like the Christians at Pentecost were, **"aglow with the Spirit"**[1]**,** as the Apostle Paul once called the church at Rome to be. If you think about it, you'll see that the entire purpose of the seven letters to the churches of Revelation was to fan the flame of faith even higher and hotter.

Christ wants followers who will love God and others with the hot passion of first love (*The Letter to Ephesus*). He wants there to burn within us the flame of perseverance that outlasts persecution (*The Letter to Smyrna*). He seeks believers on fire for the truth (*Pergamum*); who crackle with a passion for holiness (*The Letter to Thyatira*); and who glow with integrity – with a reality that matches their reputation (*The Letter to Sardis*). Jesus longs for disciples aflame with enthusiasm for the door of opportunity God has given us to extend his mission to the world (*The Letter to Philadelphia*).

These sorts of Christians glorify God by their light. They can be used by him to ignite or rekindle the faith of others. But even the opposite of a hot Christian is better than a tepid one. If someone is altogether cold, then at least few people mistake them for followers of Jesus Christ, or think less of Christianity's effects because of their example. Nothing is so useless to God and damaging to the witness of Christ in the world as tepid Christians.

What is so disturbing to Jesus is how many such people don't even perceive their condition in this regard. It was that way with the church people at Laodicea. Jesus says: "**You say, 'I am rich… and do not need a thing'… But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."** Oh, the Laodiceans had enough worldly wealth to rebuild their city without the help of Caesar, but Jesus knew that unless they became humble enough to receive the riches of God's grace they would never rebuild their characters. The Laodiceans might well have all the worldly wisdom necessary to heal their eyes, but unless they received the light of God's truth they would continue to walk in darkness. They might have all the warmth of the latest fashions, but unless they received Christ's love to heat their hearts and his righteousness to clothe their souls they would remain shamefully naked in their sin.

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IV

There are only two things that God can do with people like that. The first is to give up on them. Like a Bridegroom whose lover has gone waltzing after Waldo once too often, God could simply harden his heart. Jesus suggests that he is almost ready to do that with the Laodiceans. "**I am about to spit you out of my mouth,"** he says. But this is where the nature of God that Jesus reveals drives us to our knees in humble worship and wonder. For he shows us that God has not stopped loving his people. Even the hard words he has spoken thus far are moved by a tender passion. **"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline,"** he says. And so, rather than walking away, God returns to his beloved one more time, uttering those timeless words that still echo down the centuries and speak to you and me: **"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me."**

With the courtesy of a true gentleman Jesus knocks at the door of our lives one more time. To those who open the door, an amazing surprise is in store. There stands One who does not condemn, command, or cast us out – though he rightly could. Instead, Jesus gently gives **"counsel"** to open our hands and receive the gifts he brings. He says: "Here, receive true wealth – the '**gold'** of my kingdom, **'refined in the fire, so you can become rich.'"** Here, receive true warmth -- the '**white clothes'** of my righteousness and forgiveness to cover your "**nakedness."** Jesus says: "Here, receive true wisdom -- the **'salve'** of my Spirit **"to put on your eyes, so you can see.'"** And those who receive find their eyes opened to see the wonder of the feast and the fellowship Christ brings.

It must be said that when Christ enters a human heart, it is not to participate in a tepid relationship, but rather to pursue a total communion. He does not come to stay simply for dinner and then be on his way, leaving us to our own devices and desires the rest of the week. He does not come in, contented to be restrained to the public rooms of that house. When Jesus is invited into our lives, he comes seeking to take up occupancy in the whole of that house for life. He seeks to venture into every room of our character and conduct. He wants to clean-out the closets whose contents we want to lock away from others' eyes. He comes to redecorate and refurnish wherever his renovations are needed. Jesus comes to set up new rules, new schedules, new patterns of living. He enters in order to become nothing less than the Lord of the House – and in the process to turn our little domain into a portion of his grand dominion. But no one who grants him entry is ever sorry they did.

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In the end, every one of us must make a crucial choice. Will we fall to the temptation of tepidity, or allow ourselves to be made "hot" again? Will we be half-hearted, casual, and lukewarm in our concern for Christ and the things of God? Or will we be wholehearted in our dedication to Jesus, opening our lives to him, accepting the different kind of wealth, the greater warmth, the better wisdom he offers? What choice will you and I make to Christ's invitation? For Jesus says: **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."**

[1] Romans 12:11

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