CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS
A STUDY ON REVELATION 1-3

Spiritual Renewal - Faithful Witness
Revelation 3:14-22

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on November 23, 2014, at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.
Sermon Text
Revelation 3:14-22

14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

15 “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 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 eat with him, and he with me. 21 The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”
**Introduction**

I wonder how many of us here this morning are in need of spiritual renewal. If you are like me, to some degree you could say that this need for spiritual renewal is an ongoing need. One of the benefits of coming here Sunday after Sunday is that we receive the ongoing spiritual renewal we need just to live life week after week.

One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 73. It begins with the psalmist admitting and confessing that he had a crisis of faith. He says in verse 2, “But as for me, my feet almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” He was having trouble fitting God into what he was seeing take place in everyday life and he was tempted to rethink the role of God in his life. People who had nothing to do with God seemed to be prospering, and here he was, following God and life hadn’t been easy. He was having a spiritual crisis. But then right in the middle of the psalm, the mood of his heart changes. He says in verse 16, “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” Doesn’t that describe what we often experience on a Sunday? We come here having struggled with the real issues of life during the week and we even wonder at times how God fits into these challenges of life. Then we come to church and we are reminded of God and his activity in our lives and it is like pushing a “spiritual reset button” and we are renewed in our faith. So, to some degree, we are in continual need for spiritual renewal.

But I wonder this morning if there are some here who need a deeper spiritual renewal than the weekly encouragement we all need in our lives. I wonder if you are here this morning and you just can’t seem to take your faith beyond Sunday morning. See, here is what I want you to see about spiritual renewal. We are not just talking about a Sunday morning “spiritual pick-me-up” like an energy drink or a shot of espresso to get you through the day or the week. True spiritual renewal shapes the way you live and it leads to being a useful witness for Jesus in this world. Perhaps a test you can take to evaluate the degree of spiritual renewal that is needed is to simply ask yourself, “By the way I live, am I a useful witness for Jesus in this world?”

I am struck by how Jesus introduces himself to the church at Laodicea. He says in Revelation 3:14, “The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.” Here Jesus is referred to as “the faithful and true witness.” Jesus is the prime example of a “faithful witness.” He endured to the end, even the cross. He was faithful. Now obviously, Jesus was the “true witness.” He was the perfect Son of God. In fact, when Jesus is called “the Amen” in this verse it is a quote of Isaiah 65:16 where two times we read of the “the God of truth.” Jesus is “the Amen,” the God of
truth, the God who keeps his word, “the faithful and true witness.” This idea of “witness” has been the focal point for all the messages to the seven churches of Asia. The churches are “lampstands,” that is, we are lights to this world, witnesses for Christ in this world. As we have seen, some of these churches are better witnesses than others.

Now the last thing it says about Jesus in his introduction to the church of Laodicea is that he is “the beginning of God’s creation.” In a few moments you will see the connection between the city of Laodicea and the city of Colossae. They are only ten miles apart and they were part of a tri-city region with a third city known as Hierapolis. So when Paul wrote the letter of Colossians, it was a letter for the churches in these three cities. And in this letter, Paul has this long and glorious statement in the first chapter about Jesus and he begins it by saying, “by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth.” But I don’t think that is the focus of what it means here that Jesus is “the beginning of God’s creation.” I think the focus here is on how Jesus is making everything new. Jesus is the beginning of God’s “new creation.”

Do you remember how I said that the title for Jesus as “the Amen” is taken from Isaiah 65:16 and the phrase “the God of truth”? In the very next verse Isaiah speaks about the activity of this God, “For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind.” You fast forward to the New Testament and 2 Corinthians 5:17 and here we read, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.” That is a statement of spiritual renewal. Many here this morning can testify to the fact that through Jesus God has changed your life. Tonight, we will hear stories and testimonies of thanksgiving for what God has been doing in our lives. But to what end? Our individual stories are part of a grand story where God is making all things new and right now he is doing that through our witness. Listen to what Paul says after reminding us that we are new creations, “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” The goal of spiritual renewal is not some spiritual pick-me-up to get me through the week. Rather, it is so that I might be a witness for Jesus in this world.

And that was the problem at Laodicea. Their witness was compromised. They had become lukewarm in their faith. They needed spiritual renewal. Do you know why? They lived in an affluent culture and the trappings of wealth became a temptation that compromised their faith. When Jesus gave the parable of the four soils, he spoke of some seed falling on thorny soil. It would take root, but the thorns choked the plant and it died. He said the seed that fell on thorny soil is the word of God that falls on the heart
but “the deceitfulness of riches” choke the word. That is what was happening in Laodicea. It is not a statement that money and affluence is bad or evil. It is just that when you live in an affluent culture, there are certain trappings that come with affluence that can tempt you to compromise your faith and temper your witness for Jesus. And so as we look at this message, I can’t help but think that there is something here for us. I can’t help but think that we need some spiritual renewal that we might be faithful witnesses for Jesus in this “affluent culture” and in this world.

Lukewarm Spirit - Lost Witness

I want you to see this morning that the temperature of your heart has an impact on your witness for Christ. The church at Laodicea is described as having a spiritual temperature that was “lukewarm.” Do you know what the result of that was? They lost their usefulness for Jesus in this world. They were no longer a witness for Jesus in this world. When a church loses its witness for Jesus in this world, it loses its purpose. That is why we are here. They needed spiritual renewal so that they would be the witness Jesus called them to be in the city of Laodicea and beyond.

The condition of their heart is described for us in a familiar passage, verses 15-16. “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.” To understand what Jesus is saying here, you need to understand something about the city of Laodicea.

First of all, the reason this city was prosperous and wealthy was because the two major trade routes to the east came together in Laodicea. Consequently, Laodicea became a center for commerce and banking and the hub for communication with the east. The downside of the city was that it had no natural source for water. The city of Laodicea was established simply because of these trade routes that came together, not because of their natural resources. I mentioned earlier that Laodicea was part of a tri-city region with two other cities. Hierapolis was six miles north and Colossae was ten miles to the east. Both of these cities were known for their water for different reasons. Hierapolis was known for their hot springs. It became a major health center and people would travel there for the healing qualities of the hot springs. Colossae, on the other hand, was known for their cold water supply and it was refreshing to drink. In order to get water to the city of Laodicea, it was piped in by an aqueduct from the hot springs of Hierapolis. By the time the water made its way through six miles of pipe to the city of Laodicea, it was lukewarm and it had a strong mineral taste because of the hot springs. Quite frankly, it was not drinkable when it arrived. If you went to drink it, you would want to spit it out of your mouth.
So when Jesus says, “Would that you were either cold or hot!” he is saying that he wishes that they were a useful witness for him. They are not spiritually refreshing like the cold waters of Colossae. Nor are they a place of spiritual healing like the hot springs of Hierapolis. Rather, they are lukewarm and they have lost their usefulness as a witness for Jesus. And in very strong words, Jesus says that because of this, “I will spit you out of my mouth.”

So what was it that caused the temperature of their hearts to “lukewarm” and consequently lose their witness for Jesus? I think it was the challenge of living in an affluent culture. He gives the reason for them being lukewarm in verse 17, “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.” The challenge with affluence is the false sense of self-sufficiency. I mentioned last week how the city of Philadelphia was leveled by an earthquake in 16 A.D. and to help them recover Rome gave them a reprieve from paying taxes for five years. Well the same thing happened in Laodicea in 60 A.D., they too suffered from an earthquake that greatly damaged the city. But unlike Philadelphia, they refused government assistance and with their own resources they rebuilt the city and it was better after the earthquake than before. And so this “self-sufficient” spirit that permeated the mindset of the city made its way into the hearts of the church and it lead to a compromised faith and witness.

The problem with self-sufficiency is that you lose sight of your need for God. It is our constant temptation and struggle living in an affluent culture. I was reading an article by Cindy Rivadeneira. Her husband had his own business and it was very successful. At the height of his success, he brought home a check from the first quarter of the year and it was more than what he had made the entire previous year. She remembers dancing in the kitchen, clinging to that check. And she noted how often she and her circle of Christian friends would tie the blessing of God to prosperity and health. But when the recent recession hit, they hit rock bottom—out of money and out of credit. In the article she talks about the spiritual lessons she learned through this difficult time in her life. She said this, “Looking back at those ‘feast’ years, I have to squint to see God in my life. He was there of course, but I barely noticed him . . . The easy comfortable seasons don’t push us to our knees, seeking respite in his might and mercy. They don’t lift our hands in praise of his provision and his wonder. Not like being in need, like being broke—in its various definitions—does or can.” Speaking of his own trials Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:9, “But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God.” This is the constant spiritual challenge that comes with affluence. When we lose sight of our dependence on God we lose a certain vitality to our faith and we end up with a form of religion but not the power of God and our witness is compromised.

Do you know what else we lose sight of when our hearts are dulled by affluence? We
lose sight of ourselves and we don’t even recognize it. Jesus says to them in verse 17, “For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” Isn’t that interesting? Their spirits have been dulled to the point where they do not have a true self awareness. They formed their self identity by the sum of their possessions, thinking that they have arrived, they are somebody, they are of great “personal worth.” That is what happens in an affluent culture, the worth of a person is defined by the sum of his possessions. That is what happens when your identity is wrapped up in what you have. But they didn’t realize that they were in a “wretched and pitiable” state of being. The word “wretched” here means that they were “miserable, filled with distress.” They equated economic prosperity with the blessing of God. It is not to say that prosperity has nothing to do with the provision of God, it does. But it is not the definition of the blessing of God. You can be prosperous and not have God at all.

How you view yourself has an impact on how you view others. Do you know what money does? It tends to create a social pecking order. And who is at the top of the pecking order? It is the wealthy. It is a rather natural thing that happens because power comes along with it. The moment there is any “sniff” of wealth in our culture there is immediate worth that is placed on the person. When wealth begins to define a person’s “worth” - and if it has become the definition of the blessing of God - we begin to lose our witness because it conveys an inflated view of ourselves and a false sense of our standing before God. We don’t see ourselves as equally needy before God, at least not as “needy” as the next person and that leads to a critical spirit, a judgmental spirit, a lack of compassion and a lack of love. This was the problem in Laodicea and it led to a lukewarm faith and they lost their witness for Jesus.

Zealous Spirit - Steadfast Witness

So what is the solution to a lukewarm spirit that has been formed in an affluent culture? How do you renew the heart of a lukewarm faith? We can’t change the culture. We live in an affluent culture and there is good in that. It is the result of a good work ethic that flows from a Christian worldview. God created work and blesses it. So this is not a message against work and against earning money and economic advancement. It is just a warning of some of the challenges that comes in living out our faith in the context of an affluent culture. So what is the solution to a lukewarm spirit? How does a lukewarm spirit receive spiritual renewal? Jesus is the solution. We need to cultivate a zealous heart for Jesus. I like how Caryn Rivadeneira puts it. She said, “We need to confess the chokehold that the prosperity gospel has on us. We need to replace it with a different kind of gospel, a ‘disparity’ gospel, if you will.” We need to be marked with a zealous faith in Jesus. That is how we become a steadfast witness in this world.
Look at what Jesus says in verse 18, “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.” Now, remember, at the end of verse 17 he said that they were “poor, blind and naked.” So where does one find true wealth to satisfy their need? Where does one find true clothing to cover their shame? Where does one find true sight to truly see things as they are? They are all saying the same thing. Ultimately, our identity is not in our wealth but in Jesus. We need a continual dose of the gospel of Jesus Christ to combat a lukewarm spirit.

Laodicea was an area known for commerce and banking. To this church in an affluent culture, Jesus reminds them, “you need to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich.” People think that so many problems in life would be solved if they had money. Or, so many things you tend to worry about would be gone if you had a few more “riches.” We tend to look to wealth as what will ultimately satisfy. We forget what is here today, could be gone tomorrow. Or, once this wealth is achieved, it is discovered that it can’t fill the hole that is in the heart. Only Jesus can satisfy the heart. We were made to know God. Until we come into relationship with God, no amount of money will ultimately satisfy the longings of the soul.

When he says “buy from me gold” he is not suggesting that you can purchase this relationship with God. Rather it is something freely given to us and requires a response of faith. The prophet Isaiah said it this way in Isaiah 55:1-2, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” James Boice said it this way in a hymn based on this passage, “Come to the waters without any money; drink from the Fountain that never runs dry, Jesus, the Living One offers you mercy, life more abundant in boundless supply . . . . Come to the Fountain without any money; buy what is given without any cost. Jesus, the Gracious One welcomes the weary, Jesus, the Selfless One, died for the lost.” A zealous spirit for Jesus is developed when we remember that only Jesus can satisfy the soul.

Laodicea was also known for their garment industry. They were known for expensive garments made of a glossy black wool. What do we say when someone is all dressed up? “You look like a million bucks!” Nakedness is a symbol for shame and in the Old Testament it is a symbol for judgment. When Adam and Eve sinned and God came into the garden they hid themselves because they were naked. You can’t cover your shame before God because of your sin with nice Armani suits or Dior dresses. Only Jesus can cover the shame of your sin. Jesus says, “I counsel you to buy . . . white garments so
that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness.” When we come to faith in Jesus, God “clothes” us in the righteousness of Jesus and he covers the shame of our sin and of our guilt. And when God sees us dressed “in the clothing of Jesus” that is when we truly look like a million bucks.” All of our sin and shame and guilt is taken away because of Jesus who died on the cross for us.

And then finally, Jesus is the “salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.” He takes away the blindness of our eyes that we can see God and so that we can see ourselves. We discover that we are not self-sufficient, but we are completely dependent upon God for everything. No amount of money gives you an advantage with God. Actually, it may make it harder to find God because until you can get to the point where you recognize that you have nothing that can earn your way to God, you will never find God. A zealous heart for God is formed out of a constant humbling of your heart before God and recognizing that you desperately need Jesus. It is the heart of the judge who comes to communion rail alongside of the ex-convict and when he receives communion he humbly recognizes that he is just as much in need of grace as the next person. When you are able to see yourself before God as one who is completely dependent upon the grace of God, you are able to love others and be the steadfast witness Jesus calls us to be in this world.

We just need a healthy dose of Jesus. I need to remind myself that only Jesus can satisfy. Only Jesus can clothe my shame and guilt before God and make me clean. Only Jesus can cause to me to see who God is and who I am. Jesus is the cure to a lukewarm heart.

I want to make this comment about our witness in this world. The more we are zealous for Jesus because of his grace and love for us, the more steadfast we will be in our witness for him. Like the other churches in Revelation 2-3, I think some of the problem in Laodicea was that because of their attraction to affluence, they compromised their faith, participating in the pagan temple rituals. It was good for business. But how do we overcome this constant conflict with culture when we don’t conflict and the constant battle it requires to be different. The key is keeping your eyes on Jesus. The key is a zeal for Jesus. I read an article this week about how much of the battle between the church and the culture is over this ethic of sex and the article was calling on us to stand firm for truth even if it means ridicule. It is an issue of being a witness in this world. I love how the article ends, it really sums up these seven messages. “The Lord does not require that we win. He requires that we be steadfast. The battle is not ours but his. Yet let us not suppose that we are doomed to lose this fight. The gates of hell are not iron; the gates of hell are straw. For a vanguard has gone before us that our opponents cannot see, whose very existence they do not suspect. It is that great cloud of witnesses
–and they are armed in the full array of God.” Where does such a steadfast witness come from? It comes from a renewed heart that is zealous for Jesus. Jesus says in verse 19, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.”

Intimate Spirit - Effective Witness

This brings us to another verse that is very familiar, but I suggest not always applied as it is intended. Jesus says to us, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” We often hear this verse used as an invitation for someone who is yet to come to faith in Christ. I think that can be an appropriate picture, but in the context here, it is an invitation to the church. It is the invitation that leads to spiritual renewal for all of us. It is an invitation that invites us to intimate relationship with Jesus. As we repent of our lukewarm hearts and turn with zeal to Jesus, we find intimate fellowship with him. Our hearts are renewed and we are refreshed.

But don’t forget where spiritual renewal leads us. It makes us useful witnesses for Christ in this world. Look at the promise of verse 21, “The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” I am not sure what all this means for the life to come, but I think there is present application to this verse and it has to do with our witness. When Jesus ascended to heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father, he was given authority over all things. At the Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus begins by saying “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go and make disciples.”

We sit with Jesus on his throne by going into this world and with authority proclaiming hope and forgiveness to a world that is lost. We are ambassadors for Jesus Christ and he is making all things new. He is doing that right now through our witness for him, one person at a time. We don’t have time to be “lukewarm.” To much is at stake! We don’t want to be useless to what Jesus is doing in this world, like lukewarm water that one spits out from his mouth. We need a spiritual renewal that is zealous for Jesus in a way that confesses our absolute dependence upon Jesus for God’s grace and leads us to see that we are no better than anyone else. Rather, we have a message that could satisfy the longing of their soul, clothe the shame of their sin and bring sight to their hearts. So Jesus stands this morning at our hearts, knocking at our door, wanting to come in and fellowship with us so that in the power of Jesus we might exercise the authority given to us to pronounce good news to this world.

I will say to you what a pastor friend of mine says to me all the time—Lets go for it! I think God has poised WEFC with this spirit and may nothing deter us. Lets go for it!
Conclusion

Church of Ephesus: commended for holding on to truth but warned for abandoning love
Church of Smyrna: hang in there when persecution comes, and it will come
Church of Pergamum: you are holding fast to the faith, but beware of compromise
Church of Thyatira: you are excelling at good works, but beware of false teaching
Church of Sardis: you are in danger of becoming a church in name only
Church of Philadelphia: I commend you for your faithfulness
Church of Laodicea: don’t allow the riches of this world cause you to be lukewarm, but be zealous for Jesus and a witness for him
Church of WEFC: Hold to the truth, endure persecution, don’t compromise, excel at good works, be faithful and zealous for Jesus. Let’s go for it!
1Caryn Rivadeneira “Blessed are the Broke and Rick are the Financially Desperate. Just ask my family” in Christianity Today October 2014, 58
2Ibid., 58
3Anthony Esolen “Stand Firm: Or end up on the wrong side of eschatology” in Touchstone Magazine, May/June 2014 p. 4

© by Dr. Scott Solberg - All rights reserved