

Struggles Keep Us from being Lukewarm

Revelation 3:14-22 (NIV)

¹⁴ "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. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 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 that person, and they with me. ²¹ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

How are you today? Did you answer, "Fine," "Good," or "Okay"? Anyone, at least in your mind, say, "I'm struggling?" Sometimes it's apparent when someone is struggling physically, but internal struggles we can hide and keep to ourselves. If we took the time today to talk and get to know people, we would find that everyone in this room today is struggling with something, including your pastor.

Over this past year, I think my struggle has been losing some of my idealism when it comes to being a pastor. I always figured that if the pastor was insatiably kind and hopeful and tried to understand people, if he always made himself available, prayed with people, reached out to them regularly, then he could keep people from becoming apathetic in their faith, keep them from growing distant from the body of Christ, the body of believers. Sadly, the hard truth is that even when you are striving to be a Christ-like servant, trying to be all things to all people to save some, some will still criticize you sharply, reject you, distance themselves from you, even hate you. So, God, what are you trying to teach me with my struggles? I think one answer for everyone struggling is found here in our reading from Revelation chapter 3.

The Apostle John wrote to seven different churches at the beginning of the book of Revelation. You can see them all on the map in the worship folder. This seventh church is located in Laodicea. It was a wealthy trade city known for its banking establishments which housed their precious coins, its medical school renowned for its eye salve, and its textile industry which made clothing. To the north of Laodicea, the city Hierapolis had hot springs, and to the south, Colosse had cold springs of clean and refreshing drinking water. Laodicea's problem was that water had to be brought into the city via aqueduct six miles to the south. By the time the water reached Laodicea, it had become lukewarm, tepid, unclean, undrinkable, the kind of water that makes you sick, that you would spit or vomit out.

Through the pen of John, Jesus uses that picture of their disgusting imported water to confront the spiritual sickness of the congregation in Laodicea. "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." (verses 15-16) Hot water is good for a cup of coffee or tea. Cold water is refreshing to drink. But this congregation is neither. They are lukewarm.

Why is this congregation lukewarm? "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'" (verse 17a) That sounds kind of nice, doesn't it? They have all that they need. They have plenty of money in the emergency fund. They probably had a decent sized congregation, never hurting for offerings. They don't seem to have any struggles.

However, their well-to-do life without struggles had led them to believe and live as if they didn't need God. There was no urgency in making God their dwelling place every day or sharing what God had done for all people because they were comfortable. They thought they were fine because they had no struggles.

We want our struggles to go away because they're hard; they cause us pain and suffering. We want everything to be easy, worry-free, set with no changes. We pray for that. Yet, God often answers our prayers by letting us struggle, by bringing things into our lives that are hard. Some respond to the struggling with an attitude of despair, that things will never get better. Others respond to the struggling by blaming God for their troubles, giving credence to the lie that God is not powerful enough to make suffering go away.

When the Christians in Laodicea said that they were fine and didn't need anything, Jesus said, "But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." (verse 17b) They were wretched because their complacent hearts were leading them to unbelief, to a rejection of God. They were pitiful because they thought that a good life was one of plenty of money instead of plenty

of God. They were poor as their move closer and closer to unbelief would cause them to lose the forgiveness of sins, the perfection of Christ, the eternal victory in heaven won for them by Christ. They were blind because they focused only on their earthly wealth and comforts and couldn't see that it would all go away one day. They were naked as their complacent hearts were now exposed and they couldn't hide from God's judgment.

Jesus does not call out their apathetic hearts and judge them to leave them in a hopeless state. He makes the intention of his words clear: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." (verse 19) Jesus calls out their complacent, lukewarm hearts so that they would realize that they were making an idol out of their wealth, that their well-to-do life had made them complacent in their faith and they were about to lose all the blessings God had won for them. Jesus stood at the door of their hearts and knocked, giving them the struggle as to whether or not they will answer the door, answer his call to them to repent of their apathy and idolatry. "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 that person, and they with me." (verse 20)

Without struggles, we have the same temptation to think that we don't need God, that it's fine to leave Jesus knocking at the door, ignoring it, like he's some kind of door-to-door salesman selling something we don't need. The struggles make us realize that we are not self-sufficient, that we are spiritually poor, that we need to be focused on what lasts forever. This is one reason why God purposefully designs the Christian life to be one of struggle in order to keep us from becoming lukewarm, apathetic people who think that they don't need God.

During those struggles that he gives us, Jesus also offers us true riches: "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." (verse 18) The gold he offers is refined by fire, all the impurities have been burned out and so it is pure and genuine, tested to last. The white clothes are his perfect life lived for us, a kind of clothing that never wears out because the material is perfect and will never leave us naked and exposed. Instead, we will be judged as right with God because we are clothed with Christ. The eye salve is Jesus drawing our attention to him, to see his riches offered to us, riches that will last forever even while this world and its wealth wastes away.

All of these riches were paid for by Jesus' struggles. Yes, Jesus as true God, struggled. He struggled as both true God and true Man through hunger, not having a bed to sleep in. He struggled through temptations as the devil tried so hard to make it so appealing to sin, to give up this whole Savior Messiah thing. He struggled as he reached out to people, loved them, cared for them, and yet they were not willing to believe in him, to follow him. He struggled as people turned their back on him, actively plotted to kill him. Jesus struggled with the suffering necessary to take all our sins upon himself, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane that God the Father would take his cup of suffering away from him. He struggled through all these things and more so that our sins would be taken away, so that he could offer us that gold refined in fire, the white clothes of perfection, and the eye salve seeing what he has done for us all free of charge. Jesus paid the price for us with his struggles.

You're here because you struggle. Each struggle we face is Jesus knocking on the door of our hearts, coming to us while we struggle to give us all these riches. He's here, knocking on your door today. He wants to go with you through your struggles, to dine with you, to get through this together. He assures us that when our struggles are all done, when we die, we will share in his victory. "To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne." (verse 21) It's not just that we will get to live with God in heaven when this is all over, but that we will get to sit on the throne with him. This is the everlasting joy in store for us after all the struggles we endure. This hope and promise of a victorious future keeps us from becoming lukewarm, thinking that we don't need God, but instead exercises our faith in him.

Christ knocks on the door of all our hearts today saying, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (verse 22) By the faith that he has given you, you've opened the door and dined with Jesus today, even through your struggles. Who else do you know who struggles, who needs to know that God gives us struggles so that we don't become lukewarm, apathetic people? Who needs Jesus' offer of gold refined in the fire, white clothes to wear, and salve to put on their eyes? Who do you know needs to have that focus of sitting on the victorious throne in heaven to get them through their struggles today?

God, it's hard to say, but thank for the struggles that keep me from becoming lukewarm. Thank you for knocking on my door and dining with me to get me through these struggles. Help me to share you with the people I know who are struggling. Amen.