

Seven Letters to Seven Churches Part 7: Laodicea
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I. An Ancient/Modern Problem

A gentle breeze brushed through my hair, tugging at the sleeves of my T-shirt, keeping me cool on a warm Northwest day. But instead of calming me, the breeze only heightened my anxiety as I stood inches from the edge of a hundred-foot cliff, about to attempt my first rappel.

A harness was fastened around my waist, and a rope anchored to a sturdy tree was threaded through a braking mechanism. My feet were snug in rock climbing shoes, and chalk dusted my hands to prevent slipping on the rope.

My companion, a seasoned rock climber with the Seattle Mountaineers, had set up the equipment, so I was fairly confident I wouldn't plunge to my death. Still, I couldn't shake the image of my body sprawled at the bottom, a frayed rope draped over me like a shroud.

Despite my fear, I had trained too long to stop now. I took a deep breath and followed my companion's instructions: "Turn around, face away from the cliff, and keep the rope taut. Now lean out until your legs are perpendicular to the cliff's face."

"Perpendicular?" I asked, hoping he didn't mean parallel to the ground.

"Exactly," he replied. My heart sank.

As I leaned out into thin air, my mind screamed, "Don't do it! The rope's gonna break!" Even when the rope held, my instincts rebelled. I convinced myself that maybe 45 degrees was good enough and began my descent.

"Eric!" my companion called out. "I said perpendicular! If you don't lean fully back, all your weight will be on the balls of your feet. You'll slip and slam into the cliff! Trust me!"

"Dear God," I muttered, thinking these might be my last words.

But they weren't. Once I leaned back the full 90 degrees, with my feet in full contact with the rock from heel to toe, I suddenly felt secure. My next words were, "Whoa! This is so cool!"

At that committed angle, I could do more than descend – I could explore. Within minutes, I was hopping around and jumping straight out, dropping several feet at a time. What had seemed impossible moments ago now felt exhilarating. The cliff transformed from a fearsome height into a breathtaking landscape. When I reached the bottom, I immediately called back, "Can I do it again?"

I've always remembered this experience because it taught me that playing it safe is sometimes the riskiest choice.

Apparently, the church in Laodicea needed to learn the same lesson. In the letter to the church in Revelation, the Spirit of Jesus, which I'll simply call the Spirit, criticizes the congregation for being half-hearted in their commitment: "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."

That's pretty harsh! The original Greek is even harsher. The word we translate as "spit out" actually means "vomit"!

Now, I have to confess that sometimes I feel Jesus is being way too critical of this struggling church in Laodicea. After all, Christians were heavily persecuted in that era. If you refused to make the required yearly sacrifice to the emperor as a god, you could lose your job or be thrown into prison. You could even be thrown to the lions or burnt at the stake. It seems like the Spirit should show a bit of compassion to believers who were most likely terrified and traumatized by Roman treatment.

But according to the Spirit, they are being shown compassion. The Spirit says, "I reprove and discipline those whom I love... Listen! I am standing at the door knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me."

So, these Christians aren't being abandoned by the Spirit. They're even promised "a place with me on my throne" if they change their ways.

How could the Spirit's stern admonition possibly be an act of love and compassion rather than the words of an insensitive taskmaster?

Hellen Keller once observed that "security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing." Before we move on, I invite you to take a moment to reflect on areas of your life where playing it safe hasn't been as safe or fulfilling as it seemed, and where taking a calculated risk has been rewarded.

II. An Ancient/Modern Solution

Laodicea was located in a highly volcanic region in Phrygia, about 100 miles east of Ephesus. It sat on a long ridge between two valleys, within sight of two other famous cities: Colossae and Hierapolis. Hierapolis was known for its amazing hot springs – and still is. The white salt and mineral deposits that have built up over centuries of continuous water flow are so vast that they make the city look like a winter ski resort from a distance.

What makes the hot springs relevant to our letter is that Laodicea's water supply came from a hot spring several miles away, transported through a large aqueduct. The water began at boiling temperatures, but by the time it reached Laodicea, it was no longer hot or cold but tepid. We

all know what it's like to drink tepid water. Hot water is useful for brewing coffee or tea. Cold water is refreshing and quenches thirst. But lukewarm water? It's gross. You only drink it if you have no other choice. Surely, the residents of Laodicea lived there despite the water, not because of it. So, the Spirit's critique about the congregation being lukewarm would have literally "hit home" for them.

Being lukewarm or half-hearted has negative effects on all kinds of areas of life as we know it today. If you're a skier or snowboarder, you know that trying to control every movement too cautiously on a slope increases your chances of falling because you're not letting your body move naturally. When you lean into the turns and fully engage with the rhythm of the terrain, the experience becomes safer and more exhilarating. If you're a small business owner, you know that being only halfway committed leads to bankruptcy, not success. If you're a musician, you know that you'll never inspire an audience if you're simply "phoning it in" artistically. And if you've ever been in a romantic relationship, ready to "tie the knot" while your partner wrestles with commitment issues, you've felt the discomfort of questioning the long-term viability of your relationship.

Really, when are we ever content or happy doing something half-heartedly, or being in a context where others do not match our level of commitment? It can be exhausting. You do know, don't you, that being half-hearted about what you're doing can be just as exhausting as lack of sleep, if not more so? Even if you are fully committed, but others are half-hearted, this situation can drain you fast. The solution is to find what you are passionate about, and do that – and do it with others who share your same passion.

This wisdom applies well to churches.

The church in Laodicea had a great excuse for their tepid commitment. It was dangerous to be publicly identified as a Christian, so why not just pray the prayers, sing the songs, and say lots of nice things about Jesus and be his follower without actually following through with committed actions? According to the Spirit, this situation is worse than choosing not to follow Jesus to begin with. After all, you incur all of the risks of being outed as a Christian without any serious prospect of experiencing what brings joy to a believer – that is, putting their faith into action.

Do you think the Spirit would prefer you to be a tepid Christian over a passionate pagan? Not if this letter to the church in Laodicea is any indication. Just as a boat can only be steered if it is in motion, so it is with the heart. The Spirit can do much more with a passionate Zeus-worshipper than a tepid Jesus-follower.

Last week, I told you that of all the seven churches in our series, I believe Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church is most like the church of ancient Philadelphia – a church that Jesus only had praise for because they had learned the hard way through a series of natural disasters the value of coming together as a community. You're not there yet, but the Church of Philadelphia is your destiny, should you choose it.

This week, the message of Laodicea provides you with the route to realizing your destiny. Right now, you have a lot of work ahead of you – recovering from two hurricanes, dealing with

lingering issues related to the departure of your last Senior Minister, and building back your financial reserves and your membership roster. Dealing with any two of these issues could be exhausting. You've got four.

If you are to overcome these challenges, you will need to listen more closely than ever to the Spirit knocking at your inner door and opening that door to allow the Spirit entry. You cannot face your challenges passively. You must embrace them with full passion and purpose.

Happily, there is much evidence to suggest that the Spirit has been preparing you for this moment for a long time. After all, the Spirit brought you here, right? And the Spirit has kept you here for a reason. The Spirit also led me here, pulling me from an opportunity closer to home because of the extraordinary potential I saw in this community. Having spent nearly a year with you, I'm more confident than ever that the Spirit has big plans for you.

And now, the Spirit has found a minister to serve as your settled Senior Pastor, who is one of the brightest, most talented young ministers in our entire denomination. Once you meet this person, you'll know within minutes that I'm not just hyping this person up. You'll see how this person's particular skills and passions are an exact match to lift out the best in you and move you powerfully forward – provided you do your part.

Choose your path – lukewarm or fully alive, half-hearted or full-hearted. One path leads to Laodicea, the other to Philadelphia. With the Spirit's guidance, your best days are ahead of you. You'll not just imagine new heights. You'll soar to them.