

Sermon
Therfield Chapel
20th July 2008
Revelation 3: 14-22

Title: The Rich Poor Church

Introduction

Background to the City

Lukewarmness Caused by Wealth

When I was a child growing up in Manchester in the 1970s, I was part of a church where children could expect some tough discipline from their parents

Looking back, if I wanted to be critical I might say that parents thought that once they'd trained their child to be obedient, their work of parenting was pretty much over

Ideas like nurturing a well-adjusted child or a secure child or a happy child were unheard of

Of course it was still in the days when it was quite legal for a parent to kill their child as a form of punishment!

But discipline was the order of the day – and discipline meant corporal punishment – lots of it – wooden spoons, rulers, canes, straps, slippers, hairbrushes - all applied liberally to the bottoms of naughty children

But there was one exception

There was a family in the church and the parents were converted hippies (it was that era remember)

And I guess that in many ways they still had some of their hippiness left in them and they let their children do whatever they wanted

And in my childish naivety I was quite envious; they could get away with anything – or so it seemed to us - and it even crossed my mind that their parents loved them more because of it

But I've since come to realise how wrong I was; as time progressed you began to see the results of their neglectful parenting – insecurity, disrespect for others, trouble at school, unable to cope with the boundaries that society imposes on us

Their parents had a soft and sentimental view of love that deemed it unloving to discipline their children

What the other parents had realised – despite perhaps being somewhat over the top in their use of corporal punishment and their one-dimensional view of parenting – was that discipline is an aspect of love

Challenging and refusing to tolerate unacceptable behaviour in our children is not unloving; actually it is loving

We can't put love and discipline as opposites

For discipline exercised from the right motives is part of loving parenting

Rightly exercised discipline is good for the child as well as for the whole household that they are a part of

What our society has largely forgotten is that punishing a child for bad behaviour can give them dignity – it affirms that we expect more of them as creatures made in the image of God

If we ignore their bad behaviour we're really sending a message that what they're doing doesn't really matter – that we don't care enough to correct them – that we expect little from them anyway – and the result is that their humanness and status as moral beings is actually devalued in the process

And the same principle is applied here to the church – expressed here in this letter from the Lord Jesus to the Laodiceans

Look in verse 19:

“Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline”

The Lord Jesus cares too much for his people to allow us to stray from him the source of all life and goodness

He accepts us as we are but he loves us too much to allow us to stay as we are

And this letter that we're considering tonight is all about words of discipline to a church that was loved too much by its Lord to be left to carry on in its present condition

The letter to the church at Laodicea is the last of the seven that we've been considering over the past few weeks

And it's a stern message to hear

When we thought about the letter to the church in Smyrna, I said that on that occasion the Lord Jesus had no word of rebuke whatsoever

But here we have to opposite: although there's lots of encouraging advice as we'll see later, there's not a single word of praise – not a single complement

And unlike some of the other churches we've studied, its big problem wasn't that that it was teaching heresy or facing persecuting; its problem was that it was lukewarm – a nominal or indifferent church

And the result was that in his loving concern the Lord Jesus has to rebuke them sharply because he is unwilling to tolerate what he finds

It's interesting to realise that the New Testament is full of both encouragement and admonition or rebuke; often we find them side by side

For the reality is that we as God's people need both

As Christians, if we're encouraged all the time eventually we start to have an inflated opinion of ourselves; we become soft and eventually pathetic; we become careless about sin and often end up emphasising God's love at the expense of his holiness and wrath

But on the other had, if we're rebuked all the time we become overly introspective and can easily miss the joy of being a believer; we may come to think of God as harsh, One who always hangs around to punish us whenever we slip up

But if we receive both encouragement and rebuke we're much less likely to fall into either extreme and become strong and balanced Christians

But here tonight we're looking at one of the most severe rebukes in the New Testament

The Background

Before we think about the theology of the letter, let's think about the city of Laodicea itself

For knowing about the city gives us a context that helps us to understand the rebuke

The first thing to note is that Laodicea was a rich and prosperous city

The local economy was founded on three highly profitable industries: banking, textiles and the manufacture of eye ointment

Laodicea has been described by one commentator as the Zurich of Asia Minor – in other words it was the banking capital of the region

And just as now banking was a lucrative business

Laodicea was also well known for the manufacture of black garments

A special breed of black sheep were reared in the area and the glossy black wool was woven into special clothes that were sold in the city and exported widely – most likely the city was a centre of fashion

Perhaps – and I’m speculating now – perhaps it was the kind of place that the celebrities of the time liked to hang out in and do their shopping as they were followed by the local paparazzi

And finally the city made and exported an eye lotion – an eye salve - that was famed throughout the ancient world; it supposedly had special healing properties

Now these industries had made many of the inhabitants of Laodicea rich and materially successful

In fact we know from the remains of the city that many large, plush houses were build there

Like in our society, property was a major symbol of wealth, affluence and status

So Laodicea was a wealthy place, the richest city of the seven cities in the Book of Revelation

In fact when in AD 17 a massive earthquake struck the region, the inhabitants of the city refused to apply to Rome for financial help with reconstruction even though the Empire allocated money specifically for such a purpose

It’s attitude was: “We don’t need your money, we have enough, thank you very much!”

They were rich

The other important thing to note about Laodicea was that it had no water supply of its own

It obtained its water supply via an aqueduct from some hot springs at Hierapolis, some six miles away and by the time it reached Laodicea the water was lukewarm and tepid

When I was growing up we lived in a house where the copper cold water pipe ran next to the hot one

And that meant that unless you ran the cold tap for a long time, you got disgusting warm water that you wanted to spit it out

And the water was like that in Laodicea – people loved to visit the city because of its affluence but always grumbled about the city’s main drawback – its water

So now with that background we can understand this letter better

What does the Lord Jesus say to them?

Well let's think about the two ways that he rebukes them:

(1) First rebuke: Verse 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

Note that The Lord begins by reminding them that he knows their deeds

It was the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre who spoke of the great discomfort he felt at the idea of living under the incessant and never-ending gaze of God

But that's the world that we all live in and we have to get used to it

And the Lord reminds them here of this; he knows all about their situation; nothing escapes him

“I know your deeds”

But in seeing their deeds comes the rebuke; in the sight of the Lord Jesus - like the city's water supply which they knew all about - they were neither hot nor cold but lukewarm

And just like the effect that tepid water can have on us, what he was seeing in the church made him want to spit them out of his mouth

In fact the Greek is stronger; it means that when he thought about them, he was about to vomit them out of his mouth

It's strong stuff isn't it?

The Lord on the verge of vomiting out his own people from his mouth

Can you imagine getting a letter like that – telling you the effect you were having on Christ?

It would be better if you were told that you made the Lord weep

But to hear that you make him sick, wouldn't that shock us to the core?

So they were lukewarm – neither hot nor cold

(2) Second Rebuke

They were deceived about their condition

In others words, there was a large gulf between how the Lord Jesus saw them and how they saw themselves

Look in verse 17:

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.

There was something wrong with how they evaluated themselves; they thought they were rich – materially rich that it – but Jesus has to inform them that judged by his measuring scales actually they are poor and pitiful

They thought that they were doing alright – that they needed nothing but their Lord seriously disagreed

We could say they were judging themselves by the wrong score-card and it's only the Lord's score card that counts in the end

Now we need to feel the strength of the Lord's rebuke: "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."

Why was the Lord so sharp in his rebuke?

Well I guess that he say something drastic to shake them out of their complacency

Remember they were blind

When you're aware of your dreadful condition, when you grieve over it, then you can do something about it

But when you look at your wretched condition and are so self-deceived that you only see good, you will do nothing about it

In other words, when what you think is light within is actually darkness, the darkness is very great and serious

So the Lord Jesus had to say something drastic to wake them up

So what was this unrecognised lukewarmness that characterised the church in Laodicea?

Lukewarmness caused by wealth

The church at Laodicea seems to have become an affluent congregation – perhaps a respectable congregation

They lived in a city that was caught up with wealth and health and fashion and it doesn't take much imagination to see that the city's cultural values were washing into the church as water washes into a sinking ship

They said "We are rich and have acquired wealth and don't need a thing" Verse 17

Do you remember the parable of the sower?

One of the things that prevented the seed from growing was the deceitfulness of wealth (riches in the AV)¹

That's very interesting because wealth can easily deceive us – even Christians

If their society was anything like ours – and it most probably was - they had bought into the idea that money is the path to happiness and the good life

Almost that we can control our destiny through financial security

That money can help us get a grip on the unpredictable and threatening events that surround us

And although we don't articulate it, we verge on thinking that financial security has the power to wipe our problems away

Perhaps like us, this society had begun to believe that you can't be happy and joyful unless you're consuming the latest toys sold to you by the capitalist world

That's why Jesus said that it is very hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God – because it's so easy to make your riches your god and trust in them

Now as always I don't want to suggest for a moment that material possessions aren't important – we are made needing to be fed and clothed and housed and educated

But material possessions can't address the final and ultimate questions of life

They can't save us from sin, from heart attacks, from cancer, from being blown up by a terrorist's bomb on an aeroplane, from bereavement, from death, from hell

If we think they can, riches are deceiving us

But once we get into that state of mind – that material prosperity is what really counts - once the church is mesmerised by the values of a society who makes wealth its god – it's not long before the church loses the plot – the gospel plot that is

¹ Mark 4:19

Once we as Christians find our meaning in society's wealth and health gospel (or any other idol for that matter), the true good news gets displaced and forgotten

When we make our comforts and possessions and ambitions into our god and find our meaning in them, God soon becomes distant, far away, remote and less and less real

We lose our joy and love for the Lord

For the reality is that we can't serve two masters

And the meaning that God gives to life becomes less meaningful to us, less satisfying

And our prayer life dries up in direct proportion to our loss of dependency on him

Our prayer life is always a reflection of the health of our Christian life; for through prayer we demonstrate our need for and interest in God

That's why there's something in the words of the nineteenth - century Scottish preacher Robert Murray M'Cheyne when he said:

"A man is what he is on his knees before God, and nothing more."

And in this condition – the one I'm describing - we stop reading the Bible and so instead of feeding on the word of God, a million other (often unhelpful) words rush in to fill the vacuum

And the result is that our thinking is shaped less and less by God's truth and more and more by our personal preferences and the strident voices in our culture

And we stop being interested in evangelism; if we no longer feel a deep need for God in our lives why ever would we think others need him?

Perhaps we begin to see the sermon as a nice piece of theatre – almost entertainment – an interesting piece of discourse - rather than the word of the Lord that we couldn't afford to ignore or miss out on

We make peace with our sin and no longer weep over it nor long for the day when we are sinners no more

Perhaps we're still interested in the intellectual defence of the gospel, but our Christianity becomes detached from its moral and ethical demands

What I'm describing is nominal Christianity

It seems that what existed in the church here in Laodicea was a version of it provoked by its comforts and affluence

It was a church of indifference where a smog of smugness and self-reliance reigned

“We do not need a thing” they said

They were zealous for nothing

Their worldly success seemed to have made them immune from thinking that they had any need for Christ

I remember listening to an African Pastor being asked by an American Christian why his congregation was so enthusiastic and fired up

I'll never forget his reply: “In the West you have God and lots of other things. In Africa we only have God, so He is our all in all; he is our wealth”

So it seems that in Laodicea their material success had made them lukewarm

Lukewarmness is the greatest insult to Christ – it seems that it is better to be in flat denial of Christ – to be cold - than to play around with the precious truths of His gospel

They had an outward form of Christianity but it no longer fired them enough to direct their lives

And the condition of the church in this place was so offensive that it made the Lord Jesus sick – he wanted to vomit them out

He just couldn't stomach it; they made him feel sick

They could hardly have provoked a stronger reaction than that

And why was it so strong?

Well the Lord Jesus had to pinch them awake from their dangerous slumber

He had to get them back to reality and snap them out of their self-deceit

For their wealth could not do for them what they were seeking it to do for them

If they put their trust in riches, they were destined to be terribly disappointed and miss the vitals of what life is about

Wealth promises so much; but it can't bring lasting happiness or security

The only riches worth having in the end are found in Christ

You can't have abundant life without him – it's quite impossible

For we were made by Christ and for Christ

And so Jesus see them as they are, not as they see themselves and so he does them a great favour by honestly declaring them wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked, for that's what they were

They thought that they were rich but Jesus told them they were poor

They though they could see but Jesus told them they were blind

They thought that they were well dressed but Jesus tells them they were naked

And if they were to say, "Who does he think he is talking to us in this way?"

We find the answer in verse 14:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

He's the Amen – He's the final word; when he's speaks there's no counter argument worth heeding

He's the faithful and true witness; there's no spin with him; he tells it straight and exactly as it is

He's the one with the ability and right to diagnose them and us

They and we dare not ignore him or rationalise away his word

And the question of course has to be asked: what about me; what about you?

What would he say to us?

And the answer is, "If this diagnosis rings for you or for me and we have an ear to hear, then we can't afford to ignore it"

And you might say, "I'm not rich – materially that it"

And my reply would be to suggest that you take a trip to the income-poor world and you'll change your mind

The reality is that all of us who live in the West are rich by world standards and by historical standards

I realised how rich I was when the first of many mothers appeared on my doorstep in Kenya asking for money to buy medicine for her baby who had hours to live after going down with that fatal disease malaria

And I asked: “How much is the medicine?”

And she replied: “50 Shillings sir” (about 40 Pence)

Just having warm homes and enough food to eat and clothes to wear and modern health care makes us rich compared with two-thirds of the people on this planet

And so we are easily prone to become lukewarm by the same temptations that snared the Christians in Laodicea

I don't know for sure, but I think that one of the major reasons for the decline of the church in Western Europe is the seduction to build heaven here using our wealth and technology

To worship things rather than the Creator

The Counsel of the Lord

So what does the Lord advise them to do in response to his diagnosis of their condition?

How can they get back on the right track?

Well interestingly, Jesus reminds them of where true riches are found and its in direct contrast to where their material riches came from:

Verse 18

¹⁸I 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.

So the Lord counsels them to buy their riches from him – and he gives them the offer of three types of riches

First, he offers them true gold; gold that is not derived from their banking system or other successful industries; it is gold bought from Christ, gold that is refined in the fire

You don't need lots of money to be truly rich he's saying – “I'll give you true wealth – the knowledge of me and of my Father; joy; salvation; eternal life; all available to you because of my sufferings on the cross”

“Buy from me gold refined in the fire”

And second, he counsels them to buy white clothes to cover their shameful nakedness

He's saying, "Your fine expensive clothes are really worthless – they aren't the most important clothes you'll need"

"What you need is to buy clothes from me – white clothes"

White clothes is probably a contrast to the black clothes that the city was famous for making

White is a sign of purity, of the righteousness that is a gift of God

So he says:

"Buy from me white clothes to wear"

And third he counsels them to buy from him salve for their eyes to enable them to see

This is not the salve the city made and exported, but divine ointment to heal their spiritual blindness and save them from their self-deception

Only then could see their true condition and address it

"Buy from me salve to put on your eyes"

And having offered these three gifts (like the responsible parent) he reassures them of his love – "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" verse 19

The Lord is not on a power trip; he's not out to crush them or abandon them; he's looking to restore them to all that he has for them

And he says: 19b "So be earnest, and repent"

Recover that zeal; the passion; turn around from your present condition and become hot

Change your habits; change your company; cultivate prayer and regular Bible reading – we never drift into godliness and healthy spirituality

And then we reach a turning point in the passage

It's all happy from here

Look at the gracious offer he puts before them – it's very beautiful

²⁰Here 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.

His response to them is as gracious as his rebuke is sharp

Now I know that this verse has been used most frequently in personal evangelism - as if it's addressed to non-Christians; but it's important to realise that when it is used in that way its taken out of context

Because this verse is addressed to Christians

And just like the gemstone shines most beautifully in the right setting, so this verse is most beautiful and meaningful in its right context

Now don't miss what's going on: King Jesus is taking the initiative

He says, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice"

Anyone

He's seeking people who will listen to him and so he comes knocking at the door of the Laodicean hearts

This is the same One who we saw in Chapter One in that great vision of the Lord Jesus – the Alpha and the Omega – the Creator of this amazing universe

The One who could easy break down any door or even the whole house if he wanted to, but instead he knocks and seeks restoration of fellowship

The Wronged Party gladly comes and seeks to eat with straying Christians

The heart of all Christian experience is a relationship of fellowship with the living God

All other Christian virtues and actions flow out of that

And because the Lord comes seeking fellowship then surely it is right to conclude that fundamentally it must have been fellowship with God that the Laodicean believers had departed from

From the lynchpin of the Christian life

They'd shut the Lord out of their lives

And here he comes back seeking fellowship again

I don't know about you but that leads me to ask:

What kind of God does that?

What kind of a God, who despite bring spurned comes back and seeks renewed fellowship with his people?

This is the Lord Jesus Christ

I don't know about you but I want to know this God

I want to worship him

I want to commune with him

And so here after being rebuked the Christians in Laodicea are invited to remove the 'Do not Disturb' sign from the doors of their lives and allow Christ to bring intimacy and fellowship and communion

"I will come in and eat with him and he with me"

A beautiful promise

And then we come to this remarkable finale

A wonderful climax to this letter

Verse 21 "To those who overcome..."

To those who invite me into their home...

To those who open the door...

"I will give the right to sit with me on my throne"

Do you see it?

He's saying:

To those who invite me into their home, I invite them to be with me forever in My home

That's an amazing promise – an amazing invitation

The Lord Jesus, the ruler of God's creation welcomes those who welcome him into his heavenly home

And what about us?

Have we shut Christ out?

Is the flame of our Christian experience burning so low that it's almost gone out?

And now we're so used to it that that it's become the norm

Or perhaps we're been so self-deceived that we think we're ok and slowly it's dawning on us that we're not ok?

Perhaps we've been so absorbed in other things that we can barely remember the last time that we knew the joy and sweetness of fellowship with Christ

Perhaps we're afraid to open the door because we're afraid of what the Lord might find – forgetting of course that he is the best one of all to clear up the mess

Open the door to him

Swap pride for humility and distance for fellowship

And you and I will be greatly blessed

And you and I will find true wealth and riches

And we'll say with the apostle Paul "In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"²

STOP

² Col 2:3