

Reigniting the Flame: Passion **Revelation 3:14-22**

I. Introduction

In the movie Pleasantville starring Tobey Maguire and Reese Witherspoon, they are sucked into a 1950's sitcom where life is portrayed as idyllic. It never rains; the temperature is always perfect, there are no real tragedies, and there's nothing really important going on outside of their perfect little town. The people living there are decent, moral, church going, and patriotic.

Everyone plays their role well...dad is the bread winner, mom stays at home, and the kids all obey. No one questions authority or asks hard questions. Everyone is always nice to everyone else. And no one feels any strong emotions, like rage or passion. Life is safe, predictable, and pleasant is Pleasantville.

Sadly, many Christians try to live in Pleasantville. That is, they try to make life safe, predictable, and pleasant. They seek to deaden any strong emotions like rage or passion. In the Revelation letter to the church in Laodicea that we are exploring today, we discover that Christ hates such dull, boring, and passionless living! Out theme this year is "reigniting the flame," and our God is a passionate God who invites us to live life all aflame, burning brightly with God's zealous agape love.

Let us pray...

II. Scripture

Rev 3:14-22

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 him, and he with me.

21 To those who overcome, I will give them the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 To those who have an ear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

III. The Situation in Laodicea

It's been enlightening to discover how Christ effectively and creatively used the unique situation in each city to illustrate His message. Let's explore how Christ connected His call to repentance to the particular circumstances in Laodicea...

Laodicea was a prosperous banking center, and was very proud of its wealth. It is very likely the church there as well was a very affluent congregation. They had the appearance of being a healthy church because they were a wealthy church.

But Christ evaluated their true spiritual condition, and declared in verse 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."*

How would it feel to stand before Christ and have your spiritual condition be declared, *"wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked!"*

Yet despite being found in such a dark and dead state, Christ still offered grace, and admonished them in verse 18... *"I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich..."* "Gold refined in fire" represents authentic faith, hope, and love that was sorely lacking in the Christian's lives in Laodicea.

Such is the inexhaustible grace of our Lord Christ Jesus! God's grace can reignite the flame of your love, faith, hope even if they are reduced to just a smoldering wick!

Laodicea was famous for its wool industry through the production and export of black wool, and the manufacturing of common and costly garments.¹ Yet, like the Emperor in the story "The Emperor's New Clothes," the Christians in Laodicea thought they were spiritual strong because they were well off and well dressed in their expensive black wool, yet Christ declared they were really strutting around in *"shameful nakedness!"*

So Christ admonished, *I counsel you to buy from me....white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness....* These "white clothes," represent the righteousness of Christ that Christ places upon us to cover the *"shameful nakedness"* of our sin.

The Bible makes it clear, all our attempts to be good and do good are like a garment of filthy rags. God will not allow you to enter His eternal kingdom wearing your filthy rag self-righteousness!

If you want to attend the wedding banquet of Christ, if you want to be granted entrance in God's eternal heaven, you had better make sure you are dressed in the white robe of Christ's righteousness alone!

¹Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Vol. 20: New Testament commentary : Exposition of the Book of Revelation*. Accompanying biblical text is author's translation. New Testament Commentary (167). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Laodicea also “had a flourishing medical school that specialized in ear and eye care and had developed an ointment for treating inflamed eyes. Because of this eye ointment, the school became world famous.²” And so into such a city, Christ admonished the carnal and compromised Christians there, *you do not realize that you areblind....I counsel you to buy from me....salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.*”

Our sinfulness blinds us to the depth of depravity that permeates our fallen hearts! We compare ourselves to those we deem more sinful than us and judge ourselves righteous! We look into our own mirrors and declare, “Surely we are good enough.” But the mirror we need to look into is God’s holy Word and righteous character!

The Laodicea Christians thought they were righteous, but Christ declared them “*wretched!*”

They thought they were admirable, but Christ declared them “*pitiful!*”

They thought they were prosperous, but Christ declared them “*poor!*”

They thought they were knowledgeable of the Bible, but Christ declared them “*blind!*”

They thought they were role models of Christian living, but Christ declared them “*naked!*”

This is the season of Lent, the season of penitence and repentance. So how do we measure the amount of sin in our life that requires repentance? What list do we use? The measurement of our goodness is God’s standard of perfection, not our standard our “good enough”!

The measure of our obedience to Christ, our righteousness, is how well are we doing at loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving everyone else with God’s love. Under that measurement, each of us falls fall short of the glory and goodness that God requires and desires.

This is why we need grace every second of every day! This is why the call to repentance isn’t a call to give us chocolate for Lent, or to stop doing some bad thing! Christ calls us to recognize that every second of every day even if our best, most obedient moment, we too are “*wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked*” as to our sinful side.

Any one ready for some gospel good news yet?

Christ invites us, not just to acts of repentance, not even just to a Lenten season of repentance, but a lifestyle of repentance, to living in a heart posture of perpetual repentance. As we do so, we are also continually covered by the righteousness of Christ. So that Father God looks upon you and declares, “Yes, apart from Christ you are indeed “*wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked,*” but in Christ I see you as my holy, dearly beloved, forgiven and adopted child!”

²Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Vol. 20: New Testament commentary : Exposition of the Book of Revelation*. Accompanying biblical text is author's translation. New Testament Commentary (167). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

IV. The Sin That Makes Christ Vomit

Now we are studying these seven letters in Revelation because we want to discover what delights God and what provokes God's judgment. So what is the sin of the Laodicean Christians that draws such harsh rebuke, which is so abominable that it makes Christ want to vomit?

Immorality? Worldliness? Denying Christ to avoid persecution? Straying from sound doctrine? Such was the sin found in the other six churches. But their sin didn't provoke near as harsh a rebuke as the sin in Laodicea. What sin is so disgusting to God that it makes Christ want to hurl us out of His mouth?

Christ declares in our passage... *"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...!"*

The one sin, among all the sins condemned in these seven letters that is so distasteful to Christ that it makes Him want to puke is the sin of being lukewarm. We'll define that in a minute.

Again, Christ uses the particular situation where a church is located to illustrate dramatically His message. Laodicea had no natural water supply. It piped in its water through aqueducts from the hot springs at Hierapolis at a distance of six miles. By the time the water arrived there, it was only lukewarm. Also, because of the calcium carbonate in the water, it had a nauseating effect on the people who drank it. By contrast, Colosse, eleven miles away, was blessed with springs producing refreshing water that was cold and pure.³

Into this situation, Christ declared to the Christians in Laodicea, "I wish you were either hot or cold." The hot water from the springs was medical, and it was useful for bathing and clearing, and hot drinks. The cold water from Colosse was refreshing. But lukewarm water full of sediments was barely useable, nauseating, and a source of great complaint. Such is how Christ deems lukewarm Christians.

Here is what is meant by lukewarm Christians. To be lukewarm is to lack passion. It is to live life numb with the spiritual heroin of legalism. It is to lack any zeal or zest for life, love, and God. To be lukewarm is to be constricted, emotionless, numb, and apathetic.

Lukewarm Christians are what I call Zombie Christians. They think that the way to please God and control sin is to deaden all desires and passion. Lukewarm Zombie Christians think they are good, decent Christians because they follow all the rules, and avoid doing the really bad sins. But they are guilty of the greater sin of living with no zeal for God, no zest for life, and no passionate love for others! Like the good, decent, tithe-giving Christians of Laodicea, Zombie Christians make Christ want to puke!

³Kistemaker, S. J., & Hendriksen, W. (1953-2001). *Vol. 20: New Testament commentary : Exposition of the Book of Revelation*. Accompanying biblical text is author's translation. New Testament Commentary (169). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

V. Our Passionate God

But the triune God of the Bible is a passionate God! Yahweh raged in fury over the rebellion of His people. Christ railed against the coldhearted Pharisees! The Holy Spirit is portrayed as fire! God is the author of life. God has given us the gift of life and he despises those that hate life, those that lose their love of life!

In the Christian tradition, sloth is considered one of the “seven deadly sins.” Sloth is not just laziness; it is apathy, a loss of the love of life, the loss of gratitude for the gift of life, the loss of a zeal to live life to the fullest!

Some of the highest values of our postmodern world are cynicism and skepticism, both of which are a form of sloth. They both declare that life has no real meaning or purpose. They both rob one of the love of life.

Cynicism and skepticism declare, “no one can be trusted, nothing can be believed in, everything and everyone is corrupt, there is no grand story, there’s no sense in trying hard, or looking forward to a bright future!” Like Solomon in his rebellious years, cynicism and skepticism declares, “meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless!”

Such values are straight out of the pit of hell! They are anti-God, anti-faith, anti-life, anti-joy, and anti-Christ! Such lies come right out of the mouth of Satan the thief who comes to rob us of life, As John 10:10 declares, *“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; (but) I, (declares Christ Jesus) came that (you might) have life, and have it (life) abundantly!”*

The “thief” comes to make us lukewarm. Christ comes to give us abundant life!

There are two words for life in the Bible, “bios” and “zoe.” Bios is the natural life that we all receive when we are conceived in birth. Zoe is God’s life, the supernatural, eternal abundant life of God! Zoe life is what we receive when we are born anew, when we become a regenerated, justified, Spirit-filled, adopted child of God! Eternal life is nothing something we begin in heaven. Eternal life is a quality of life that we can begin as soon as we are Christians.

The Bible speaks of two conditions of life that Christians can live in at any given time. “Death” life or “Eternal Life. Rom 8:6 reveals, *“the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”* Living life in or sinful self, being lukewarm Christians is a death life, but living life in the Spirit fosters “zoe” life.

The Bible also makes a distinction between evil desires and righteous passion. Starting very early in the Christian tradition, many teachers, preachers, scholars and theologians only emphasized the evil nature of our passions. In an attempt to control our sinful nature, they taught that the way to control sin was to deaden passion.

This was not the teaching of Christ, but of the Stoics who sought freedom from all passions, or “*apatheia*” where we get our word “apathetic.” And this is Buddhism not Christianity! The Stoics, the Buddhist, and the legalistic early church theologians all misunderstood that passion is not our enemy, but misguided passion.

Contrarily, Augustine, and even the Puritans understand that the way to mortify sin and vivify our new creation spirit was to redirect our passions to the higher affection of God! While we need to continually put to death sinful passions, the Bible also commands us to fan into flame godly passions!

The word used most often for godly passion in the Bible is “fervency” or “zeal.” They are actually the same Greek word, “*zelos*,” meaning “excitement of mind, ardor, and fervor of spirit!” Fervency in Greek is also used for metal when it is red hot, and water at its boiling point. This brings us right back to the sin of lukewarmness.

God hates when His children are lukewarm. God invites and empowers us to be boiling water! Indeed, our passage even goes so far as to reveal that God would rather we be cold than lukewarm.

The lukewarm Christian is so blinded by his or her self-righteousness, they think they are fervent! At least the flat out cold Christian or the one not yet saved knows he or she is in a backslidden state of rebellion. Christ can work with that! The passionate prostitute is closer to the gospel than those living in lukewarm religiosity.

Christ wants us to be red hot and boiling!

VI. Christ’s Call to Fervency

We’re following God’s call this year to reignite the flame. Christ commands us, calls us, empowers us to be all aflame!

1 Peter 4:8 declares, “Above all, keep **fervent** in your love for one another....”

Rom 12:10 declares, “*Be devoted to one another in love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, **fervent** in spirit, serving the Lord....*”

In the movie Pleasantville, the two teens sucked into the black and white sitcom, eventually start encouraging people to embrace passion in art, music, hobbies, dance, sensuality, and as each one does, they go from being a black and white character to full color. It is scandalous and redemptive!

In another movie, Equilibrium, all emotions are outlawed because they are seen as the root of all evil. (This sounds like American Christianity!). Christian Bale plays an “emotion cop,” whose job it is to arrest those who display emotions. He realizes this whole situation is wrong, so he stops taking the shot that suppresses emotion. His rebellion sparks a movement that reclaims emotions in society!

Will you be a fully alive, colorful Christian in the midst of Zombie Christianity to boldly call others to abundant life!

Will you live on the edge of grace without falling off the edge into legalism or licentiousness?

What does it look like to be full of zeal, zest, and fervency? It means to be fully alive and fully present in every moment! It means doing all things to the best of your ability and to the glory of God! To live in God-pleasing fervency is to do all things with godly passion and zeal!

If you're going to do something, to do anything, do it with passion! Don't be timid, insipid, little, wishy-washy, mealy-mouthed, and cowardly! Live boldly! Stand on convictions!

It is a proven fact that happiness is not the product of doing what we must want to do, but doing whatever it is we have to do to the best of our ability. Success and happiness is the product of quality.

I had to clean the toilets of elementary school to work my way through college. Those urinals and sinks were shiny and spotless! I could look back over my work and feel proud! It doesn't matter whether you are cleaning toilets or writing sermons. If you do all things the best you can, with zeal to the glory of God you will experience joy and godly pride.

If you're doing your career work, housework or homework, do it with zeal to God's glory!

If you're engaged in recreation, do it with all your heart!

If you're going love your wife, kid, or friend, do it with all your might!

If you're going love God, love fanatically!

Live passionately!

Give extravagantly!

Laugh hilariously!

Weep wholeheartedly!

Love lavishly!

VII. Christ is Knocking. Will You Answer the Door?

There is one final message in this letter we need to explore that is both full of tragedy and full of grace. Christ declares in verses 19 and 20... *"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 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 him, and he with me."*

We often use this verse as an altar call invitation to un-Christians. But this is Christ speaking to Christians! Throughout this letter, the Greek is plural as Christ is addressing the whole congregation in Laodicea. But here the Greek switches to singular. Christ is calling out to any individual in this congregation that was willing to let Christ back in, to let Christ reignite the flame in his or her lukewarm heart!

This is Christ standing at the door of our hearts with tears in His eyes, “if you just open the door, I will come in and have a meal with you.” The word “meal” here is “deipnēso,” and conveys the thought of familiar intercourse. The “deipnon” was the main meal of the day, and was a leisurely affair, not a hurried snack.⁴ This is Christ’s offer of intimacy even to those who are now living in lukewarmness.

And to those who do live life with passion, zest, and zeal for God’s glory, Christ give us this eternal promise as well...*”21 To those who overcome, I will give them the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”*

What an intimate, alluring, motivating image of sitting side-by-side with Christ on His throne for all eternity co-ruling the universe. Such is the reward of rejecting lukewarmness and embracing fervency now! That’s the eternal reward, but Christ offers us this immediate reward...

To those who you who have allowed your love of God or another to grow cold, Christ is knocking on the door of your heart, tenderly pleading with you...

*“Let me in once again,
and we’ll have a nice, leisurely meal together
as you pour onto me all your sin,
sorrow, struggles, questions, fears, and doubts.”
“And as you do,
I will slowly reclaim every inch of your heart.
I will reclaim every room of your life where you’ll allow me in.
I will blow with my Spirit upon your smoldering wick faith,
upon the ashes of your hope,
and upon your barley glowing ember love
and fan them into a fervent flame once again!”*

Such intimacy and fervency is the gift Christ offers us now! Will you accept Christ’s invitation and open up the door of your heart, open up the door to every room in your life?

⁴Morris, L. (1987). *Vol. 20: Revelation: An introduction and commentary*. Originally published: The book of Revelation. 1987. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (86). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.