

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. ¹⁵I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷You 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. 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.

¹⁹Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. 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 that person, and they with me.

²¹To 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. ²²Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Revelation 4:1–11 (NIV)

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” ²At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. ³And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. ⁴Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. ⁵From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. ⁶Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. ⁷The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. ⁸Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

“ ‘Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”

⁹Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

¹¹“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.”

Apathy?! Complacency?! A far cry from a passionate servant of Jesus Christ.

After the dramatic vision of Jesus that opens the book of Revelation, John tells us of seven letters that Jesus sends to Christian communities in western Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Jesus commends some of the communities, such as Philadelphia, whose letter we read last week. But other letters express Jesus’ anger with

the directions the communities have taken. Of all the letters, the one to the Christians in Laodicea hits my heart hard every time I read it.

You see, I know that I spent much of my adult life as a Laodicean Christian. I went to church much of the time, sang in choir a lot, even taught Sunday School now and then, but I was lukewarm. I would have told someone that I believed in Jesus and even been able to spout some smart-sounding theology, but I was really indifferent to the whole thing. I could take care of my own needs quite well . . . or so I thought. Sadly, I didn't realize all this at the time. It is only by looking back from my new life in Christ that I can see my tepid faith for what it was.

So . . . when I read that Jesus wants to spit these wealthy lukewarm Laodiceans out of his mouth, I take a big gulp and thank God that he grabbed me rather than tossed me.

Which is it?

It is no surprise to us that Jesus would prefer the Laodiceans be hot for God, on fire and totally committed, trusting God in all things, and working to build for his kingdom. Surely, the creator of all things, the God of love, ought to be the focus of such passion and desire.

But preferring the Laodiceans be cold? Why would Jesus prefer people not know him at all, or even hate him, to simple indifference? We just finished a lengthy series on the Gospel of John. As we saw repeatedly, in that gospel when it comes to the question of Jesus there is no middle-ground, no "we'll see," no fence straddling . . . no room for indifference. One believes or one does not. One path leads to the light, the other remains in the darkness. One way leads to life, the other to death. And it is Jesus, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

In John's gospel and in Jesus' message to the Laodiceans, the term "lukewarm Christian" is an oxymoron, it makes no sense. How could someone have genuinely been born from above (John 3), have given their life over to Jesus Christ, and yet be indifferent about the whole thing. At least Jesus knows where he stands with a person who is either hot or cold.

I know that many who come to church are like I once was – present but apathetic, not allowing God into any part of their life beside Sunday morning. A little worship here and there suits them just fine. But Jesus stands at the door, knocking, waiting for us to open it, not just peek though the crack.

And then, in the genius of Revelation, as Jesus stands and knocks at our door, wanting us to throw aside all our cynicism and complacency, we are transported with John the Revelator to the throne room of God. It is a breathtaking change. . . from the apathy of the Laodiceans to the throne of God, the elders, the four living creatures . . . Holy, Holy, Holy . . . and in the face of all the majesty our imaginations can conjure up, we fall on our knees.

The throne room of God

The image John sees of the ancient one is like that of precious stones who is surrounded by an emerald-like rainbow, as in Ezekiel 1:26-28.¹ Around the throne, John sees twenty-four other thrones on which are seated twenty-four elders. It is hard to be sure of the significance of twenty-four, though the simplest and probably best explanation is that the twenty-four elders represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles.

¹Revelation is very dependent on the Old Testament, and I'll include a few references as we go along. It is natural that John would follow the prophets' descriptions of their visions as he attempts to put his own experiences into words.

From the throne emanate power and might, as thunder rolls amidst lightning. In front of the throne are seven torches representing the seven archangels who stand before the throne of God (also 1:4, 3:1, 5:6, 8:2, and even Luke 1:19!). Also in front of the throne is what John describes as a sea that is calm as glass.²

Also around the throne are four living creatures. They have eyes in front and behind, signifying that they see everything and guard the throne. These creatures are cherubim

By the end of the second century, Christians were using the four faces of the cherubim in their writing and art to symbolize the writers of the four gospels. The human face symbolized Matthew because he begins his gospel with a genealogy. Mark was the lion because his opening reference to Jesus as "Son of God" speaks of power and strength. Luke was the ox because he begins his gospel in the temple, where oxen were sometimes sacrificed. John was the eagle because his opening with Jesus as "the Word" points to Jesus' heavenly origins. In the ancient understanding of the cosmos, the heavens were "up there."¹

From Koester's, *Revelation and the End of All Things*.

(plural of "cherub").³ This image again draws on Ezekiel, this time 1:10, where there are four cherubim, though each has four faces. Here, the four faces (human, lion, ox, and eagle) are the same but each cherub has only one face. All four cherubim have six wings (Isaiah 6:2). The four faces of the cherubim are meant to represent the entire created order, which becomes evident when their Amen awaits the joining in of all creation (5:13-14).⁴

And what are the creatures and the elders doing? They are worshiping. The cherubim sing praises to God's holiness – without ceasing, as if they had been created for this sole purpose. The elders fall on the ground in their worship, casting their crowns before the throne. Before this scene closes, all of creation joins in the worship of the Creator.

Often, when we come to Revelation we are anxious to race on to the mysterious and scary scenes of beasts and destruction and special numbers. But the book is built around several dramatic and lengthy scenes of worship. They are the book's center. Indeed, chapters 4 and 5 are the heart of the Revelation given to John, *not* the endlessly fascinating four horsemen of the apocalypse.

What or whom do we worship?

Worship is hardwired into us. Our deepest self feels this urge, this need to worship. Thus, the question isn't really whether we worship, but only what or whom we worship. Will we worship our ancestors or nature or our jobs or a sports hero or wealth or sex . . . you get my point. N. T. Wright rightly takes this a step further when he says that we become what we worship. Worship money and we become greedy. Worship sex and we become lustful. . . . But worship the LORD God, our creator and redeemer, and we become Christlike. That is simply how it works.

It is easy for us to think of worship as something we all gather for once each week. We pray, sing hymns, hear a sermon, and so on. Then we return a week later for another worship service and do it all again. But this is not the biblical understanding of

²The Jews were not a sea-faring people. In their apocalyptic writings, the sea was always a symbol of chaos and terror, the birthplace of monsters (see Daniel 7). But, here, around the throne of God, the sea is calm – there is no chaos.

³This is pretty far removed from the way that we've come to think of cherubs, the fat little winged angels often equipped with a bow and arrow.

⁴David Aune's three-volume commentary on Revelation in the *Word Biblical Commentary* is a big help in sorting through the symbolism. He also wrote the Revelation study notes in the Harper-Collins study Bible. A competent guide to the symbols can take away much of the mystery, just as people 2,000 years from now will need a guide to sort through the symbolism from our own time. Who then will associate a cherry tree with truth-telling?

worship. Our growth as the covenant people of God will not come through a one-hour shot in the arm each week! Instead, as Richard Foster says so well, “To worship is to experience Reality, to touch Life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community. It is . . . being invaded by the Shekinah⁵ of God.”⁶ God actively seeks worshipers. God wants a relationship with us and our acknowledgement of his glory and worth. Worship is a vital means by which we grow as God’s people and enrich our lives with each other as well as with God.

Bringing back together the who and the what

We are made for the worship of the LORD God, revealed in Jesus Christ. And, as Simon Chan writes, “God made the world in order to make the church.” The church does not consist of buildings, not even the beautiful sanctuaries such as our own. Rather, the church consists of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed and affirm our belief in “one holy catholic church,” we mean the universal church, the body of Christ – to which all Christians, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, belong. God had once dwelt in the temple of Jerusalem, but, beginning at Pentecost, God dwells in and among his people. It is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ, a new creation and new humanity, growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God has returned. What a remarkable claim we make, that God’s very presence dwells in us, the church -- the people of God.

For more than twenty years, there has been a congregation called St. Andrew in the holy, catholic church. We have been on a journey, understanding that God created us to be his. We are a large community and we have all the blessings and challenges that come with size, but we must never lose sight of the fact that we are not merely an organization. Rather, we, as the body of Christ, are the very presence of Christ.

Thus, the stirring vision of Revelation 4, the first of several worship scenes, serves to remind us that we have been created to worship the one who made us, to live at all times and in all manners in a deep abiding relationship with the Creator of the Heavens and the Earth . . . who loves us and gave himself for us.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Hot? Cold? Lukewarm? . . . If the letter to the Laodiceans doesn’t get you thinking, then not much will. In which of these three categories would you place yourself? In which category would your friends place you? Your family? Co-workers? If your faith were hot, how would anyone know?
2. The vision in Chapter 4 is a dramatic worship scene. What do you think constitutes the worship of God? Is it more than what happens in a worship service? If so, how would you describe it to someone? Why do you think that so many Christians fail to make worship attendance a priority?
3. In what types of worship services have you participated? How would you describe them? How did they differ? What did they have in common? Which components of a worship service are most meaningful to you? What might this worship scene from Revelation have to say about our worship practices? Among the elders, the cherubim, the angels, and all the creatures of the cosmos, where would you find your place? What are your roles and responsibilities in the worship of God?
4. You might reflect on exactly whom it is we worship. If we become what or whom we worship, how do we know that we are truly worshipping the true God? What in our lives competes for our worship? Why is it so important that we worship together?

⁵ *Shekinah* is an Old Testament term meaning the glory of God dwelling with his people. It connotes God’s living presence with us, as opposed to his aloofness, distance, or transcendence.

⁶ From Richard Foster’s, *The Celebration of Discipline*, 1978, New York: HarperCollins. This is a widely read and loved book on the spiritual disciplines. The quote opens his chapter on worship, p. 158.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Revelation 3:1-13 In all these questions, we ought to strive hear God's word for us. What do you think Christians have learned from these letters over the centuries?</p>	<p>Tuesday, Revelation 3:14-22 What do you think it means to be lukewarm for God? Why would Jesus prefer us to be either hot or cold? Have you opened the door for Jesus?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Revelation 4 This is the first great worship scene. John is taken to the throne room of God. Don't get lost in the details and the possible meaning of every symbol. Enjoy this powerful imagery of the worship of God. Is this how we worship?</p>	<p>Thursday, Ephesians 1:3-21 This passage is rooted in Jewish worship and tells the story of what God has done in creation.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 All creation worships not only God, but also the Lamb.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

