

The Church in Laodicea: Compromised Christianity

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Preacher: David Trimble

[0 : 00] So we all know that a good compromise leaves everyone unhappy. Nevertheless, we all understand that there's times when we have to make compromises, when it's wise, it's necessary. It's one of life's important lessons, isn't it? Learning how to compromise. But it's also important to learn not just how to compromise, but what to compromise. And equally important, perhaps more important, what not to compromise.

There's certain things that actually we should never be compromising. Things like marriages or our parental responsibilities or promises that we've made to people.

And if we know Jesus, the gospel. The gospel is a message. It's a message of salvation from our sin. It's a story of God's own son humbling himself by taking on human flesh and living the perfect life that we couldn't live.

And dying a sacrificial death on our behalf. The innocent for the guilty. The spotless lamb for sinners slain. The gospel is a story of victory.

[1 : 07] Victory because Jesus rose again from the dead and promises that one day, if we know him, we're going to be with him forever. He promises that we too will inherit eternal life with him if we know and follow him.

But the gospel also inaugurates or begins a new way of life. When a person believes in Jesus, when they make a decision to follow him, to listen to him, to live in a way that he calls people to live, that's the big change that happens in the Christian life.

The Christian chooses to live in a way that is now countercultural and difficult. Jesus himself actually described it like this. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. As we come to the last of these seven letters that Jesus sends to various churches in this last book of the Bible, Revelation, we encounter the church in Laodicea.

This is the only church in this series of messages for whom Jesus has nothing positive to commend. The Laodiceans were a church who had believed the gospel message.

[2 : 27] They knew the gospel story, but they had compromised on the gospel life of self-denial and cross-shaped living.

But you cannot have one without the other. A compromise can often look like the easy way to get along. A compromise often looks like a safe middle ground.

And though there are times when compromising certain things can be helpful, when the gospel itself is compromised in the church, Jesus himself is disgusted.

He cannot stand the taste of compromised Christianity. And that's what we're going to be thinking about over the next 25 minutes or so. So we've got four points to work through as we think about what Jesus says to this church in Laodicea.

We're going to think about the uncompromising Christ. We're going to think about the catastrophe of compromise. The way back from compromise and then finishing up by thinking about the uncompromised victory that Jesus has won for us on our behalf.

[3 : 33] So the uncompromising Christ. Because Jesus himself is actually an uncompromising figure. That's how he presents himself to the Laodicean church.

He begins this letter saying, These are the words of the Amen, he says. The faithful and true witness. The ruler or origin, depending on your translation, of God's creation.

As with so many of the titles that Jesus claims for himself in Revelation, these are titles which belong to God. Jesus is once again staking a claim to his divinity and his right to call himself God.

In the writings of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, God is called there the Amen. Amen. That's a word we often use whenever we're praying.

It's a Hebrew way of saying, So be it or this is true. And it's a word that's related to concepts of truth and faithfulness. And so it's no surprise that Jesus follows up that saying, saying he is the Amen, by then describing himself as the faithful and true witness.

[4 : 44] Jesus is saying that he is, in a sense, the true and perfect revelation of God. Everything he says is true. He is, in a sense, truth itself and the source of truth.

His gospel message is a true message because God is true and Jesus, his son, speaks truth. In recent years, we've often been told the importance of speaking your truth.

Moreover, we exist in a culture where the phrase post-truth is used, I guess to describe the way in which truth is so often relativized and cheapened.

And it's been individualized and cheapened to the point that the notion of truth itself can often sometimes barely have any meaning. But yet, when it comes down to it, everyone recognizes that there are not really multiple truths.

Truth is singular. Two polar opposite statements cannot both be true. It just logically doesn't flow. If a barrister, for example, says that the facts of a case don't matter because truth is relative, well, we wouldn't take that lawyer seriously.

[5 : 57] Or if you're sitting an exam, you expect the marker to mark the correct answers correctly. What I'm trying to get at is that actually when it comes down to it, in our real experience, truth is not relative.

And we all actually know that. Which means if we want to find ultimate truth, these big questions of who made the world, who are we, where is history headed, well, there's only going to be one place where we can find the answer.

It's not a case of there being many roads up the mountain, because actually every religion and philosophy are saying different things, and they're all contradicting each other.

Only one worldview amongst all of them can actually be correct, and the rest, by implication, must be wrong. And so in this way, Christianity and Christ himself is uncompromising.

He is saying, I am the Amen. I am the faithful and true witness to truth itself, and that means no one else is. He is the only ruler and originator of creation.

[7 : 11] He is the only eternal Son of God, alongside the Father and the Spirit, who brought the first creation into existence. And Jesus is the only one bringing the second creation into being.

He is creating a new heavens and a new earth, where he will reign, and we will reign with him, if we know him and follow him. A perfect new creation, where the sound of weeping will never breach its gates, where death will be nothing more than a fading memory, and where the wolf will lie down with the lamb.

But that future is only found in Christ. He is the only ruler of God's creation, and he doesn't share his throne with those who do not recognize him.

And in this way, he is an uncompromising king, as he should be. If someone refuses to recognize their king, well, they shouldn't be surprised if the king then doesn't recognize them.

The gospel is for everyone. The gospel is a wide-ranging offer for all. It's an open door, and everyone, everyone is encouraged to enter through it.

[8 : 28] But not everyone will. And Jesus is offering no other way through except himself. He is the gracious and compassionate and forgiving God.

But he is also uncompromising, because he is the only truth, the only way to God, the only way to eternal life, the only king of creation.

And so it's then, as we move on to our second point, it's then appropriate that Jesus himself points out the catastrophe of compromise. And he does it with an extremely powerful metaphor that wouldn't have been lost on the Christians in this church in Laodicea.

So the city of Laodicea was quite close to two other cities. The first one was a city called Herapolis, and it was a city that was famous for its hot springs.

The other city was called Colossae, and Colossae was a city famous for its cold waters. And in between the two was Laodicea. And Laodicea had no water supply of their own, and so all of its water was tepid and lukewarm.

[9 : 40] It's bad enough that you would spit it out if you tried to drink it. And so with this in mind, we can see why Jesus chooses this particular image to convey the issue in Laodicea.

I know your deeds, Jesus says, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either one or the other. So because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.

Jesus is saying that the Laodicean church has become like the city itself. This could be a church that is like healing hot springs, but no, they're lukewarm.

This could be a church that's like refreshing cold water that satisfies your thirst. But no, they're lukewarm. If they were like a warm spring, that would be good.

If they were like a cold spring, that would be good. But instead, they're not. This church, like the city itself, is tepid and disgusting. We all know how lukewarm water tastes on the tongue.

[10:51] It's unpleasant to drink. Hot water and cold water, they're both pleasant for different reasons. But there's never a good reason to drink tepid water. Jesus finds the church in Laodicea tepid.

He finds them disgusting. And he's about to spit them out of his mouth if they don't change. But what exactly does Jesus mean when he describes this church as lukewarm?

What's the point that he's getting at? Well, he explains then in verse 17. So verse 17, he says to them, you say, I'm rich. I've acquired wealth and do not need a thing.

But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. I think really what he's getting at is something like the emperor's new clothes.

We'll all be probably familiar with the story. The tale goes that two swindlers arrive at the court of the emperor and they claim to be tailors who can make the emperor the most fabulous set of clothes he has ever worn.

[12:00] But there'll be a special set of clothes because they will be invisible to anyone who is stupid or dull of intellect. Only the brightest and cleverest people will be able to see those clothes.

And so the emperor, he hides them. He hires them. His pride is filled up. And so as they're working on the clothes, he checks up on them and the emperor looks at the looms and he can't see any clothes on them because there aren't any.

But he doesn't want to appear stupid, so he says nothing. He just goes along with it because he doesn't want to appear a fool. And the day comes when the new set of clothes are ready and the emperor goes out on parade.

And he goes out wearing this invisible set of clothes and everything's hanging out, but no one says anything because no one wants to be the one to suggest that they are stupid or dull.

That is, of course, until a child points out what is obvious to everyone. The emperor has no clothes. Everyone's been fooled. The emperor parades naked, foolish, and ashamed.

[13:06] It's a great story and I think it captures really what's going on with the church in Laodicea. They are wearing the emperor's new clothes. They thought they were rich.

They were well off. They weren't suffering the kinds of trouble that the other churches that we've seen in these set of seven messages were suffering. And so they looked at themselves and they thought we're doing all right.

They were pretty impressed by what they saw. They were smug and confident. They thought they didn't need a thing. But Jesus says, look at yourselves. You see your wealth and you assume, therefore, that you are spiritually doing well.

But the reality is that spiritually you are naked, you are blind, you are poor. When I look at you, you are pitiful and wretched. You disgust me. You think you're wise, but you have been fools.

You are, in fact, parading yourselves in nakedness and stupidity. Let us see here, they kind of got things wrong. Despite coming to Jesus by believing in the gospel and believing in Jesus' salvation from their sins, they'd begun to put their trust and identity in their wealth.

[14:16] They'd compromised on their distinctiveness and on their Christ-likeness by resting on the laurels of their riches. But the problem is, Christianity isn't about wealth or riches.

Now, there's plenty of teachers out there who would say that true faith does lead to wealth and prosperity. It's a false teaching sometimes referred to as the prosperity gospel. But Jesus has no time for it because it's a dangerous distortion of the true gospel.

Laodicea had become quite like Israel in the Old Testament. The prophet Hosea records their attitude. He said, they said that we're very rich.

We've become wealthy. With all my wealth, they will not find in me any iniquity or sin. And you can see that Jesus is kind of referring back to that. This is the same problem that affected God's people

in the Old Testament and it's reappearing here in Laodicea and can keep reappearing in the church.

Jesus himself, he told a story of a farmer who got lucky with a bumper harvest. And this story again illustrates the issue. The farmer, after his bumper harvest, said to himself, this is what I'm going to do.

[15 : 32] I will tear down my barns and I'll build bigger ones. And there I'll store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, you've plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy. Eat, drink, and be merry.

But God said to him, you fool, this very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you've prepared for yourself? And Jesus ends that story by saying, this is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.

In other words, it's not a wise idea to give your soul to wealth and to the world. If you store up things here, well, that's where they're going to remain.

But a day is coming when either we die or Jesus Christ returns. And what good will all our wealth and possessions and riches be then? The church in Laodicea was compromised by lukewarm worldliness.

Their emphasis was on wealth here and now rather than the riches that were yet to come. And not many of us here are super rich. But many of us are quite comfortable.

[16 : 47] And most of us don't want for much. And in our comfort, there is always a temptation to compromise. Because wealth and comfort are so often a barrier to faithfulness.

They preach to us day after day a false gospel of self-reliance. Money is a catalyst, really, for compromise.

And whilst wealth is perhaps the most obvious way in which the church might be compromised, it's definitely not the only way. The compromise comes when we want to have things both ways.

The Laodiceans were lukewarm because they tried to put their trust in Christ and trust in their wealth. But Christ will not share his throne. And it leads us to ask the difficult question of our own hearts.

Where might we be trying to make Jesus share a throne with different things in our lives? Where have we compromised on the uniqueness of Jesus and the gospel?

[17 : 51] Where have we tried to have it both ways? Where have we tried to have Jesus and the world? You cannot serve God and money. You cannot follow Jesus and neglect how he calls you to live.

You cannot live life in the spirit and at the same time harbor idols in your heart. The gospel is holistic and transforms the entire life.

The gospel is uncompromising and cannot be compromised. But there's encouragement here. This is our third point, the way back from compromise.

The encouraging aspect of this letter for all the failings of the Laodicean church is that Jesus has not abandoned them. The whole point of this letter is to show up the issues that are at work in this church and to affect a substantial culture change because there is truly a way back from compromise.

Which is why Jesus says in verse 19, those whom I love I rebuke and discipline, so be earnest and repent. Now discipline is never pleasant, but sometimes as every parent and every child knows it's essential if we're going to grow and develop and put away childish things.

[19 : 17] And Jesus loves his children and so at times he will discipline them. It won't be nice, it won't be pleasant, but in the long run it means that we will as God's people be producing fruit and growing to maturity.

And Christian maturity is moving away from sin and idols and our love for the world and instead moving towards Christ and it's growing in faith and holiness and Christ-likeness.

It's learning to repent and ever more earnestly to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and to follow Jesus. And it's worth it. It's worth it because Jesus is of so much greater value than anything that we might gain in this life, than any riches we might acquire.

Whatever your wildest fantasy is, whatever your most extravagant dream is, Jesus is worth so much more. And he conveys this in his words in verse 18.

He tells the Christians in Laodicea, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire so that you can become rich, and white clothes to wear so that you can cover your shameful nakedness, and

salve to put on your eyes so that you can see.

[20 : 42] Jesus has leveled his accusations at this compromised community, but he doesn't leave them without a way back. So he says, if you want riches, well don't trust in your stocks and your shares, don't trust in your salaries and your speculations, trust in me and buy gold refined in fire.

And Jesus is saying that real lasting wealth is found in him. He responds to his earlier accusation that they are naked, like the emperor parading in his new clothes.

He says, come back to me and I will give you real clothing. I will give you white robes that will cover your shame and your nakedness. Just as God made skins for Adam and Eve after they had eaten of the forbidden tree, so Jesus promises to clothe his returning people.

He redeems us from shame. And responding to the diagnosis that they are blind, Jesus says, come to me and I will give you salve to open your eyes again.

Come to me and you will see. Because the gospel opens blind eyes. And it restores fading sight whenever we lose our way.

[22 : 02] When we come to know Jesus, we become aware of our sin, we become aware of our need for a savior. But sometimes, as with this church in Laodicea, that old blindness can just start bit by bit creeping back in.

The Laodiceans, they didn't realize that they had a problem. They had allowed their success and their wealth and their love of the world to surround them like a dark veil that had come over them. So they were no longer seeing clearly.

But Jesus says if they come back to him, he will open their eyes again once more. Turning back from their compromise and from their love of this world, wonderfully, is a simple matter.

It's a simple matter of turning back to Jesus. To repent, the word Jesus uses is to turn. And that's all Jesus asks them to do.

They don't need any special shows of contrition. They don't need to be flagellating themselves.

They just need to receive him as they once did. Here I am, says Jesus.

[23 : 11] 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.

The language here is actually really similar to language that we find in the Old Testament book, the Song of Songs, when the woman's true love stands outside her door and knocks, asking the girl he loves to open the door to him.

And so Jesus is standing outside the door as the true love, courting his bride, the church. The church is so often called the bride of Christ in the Bible because Jesus loves his church as a husband loves his wife.

And when Christians and when churches wander from Jesus, their true love, he is always there. He is always calling them back, standing at the door and knocking.

Will anyone open and eat with Jesus? And it's an invitation that stands today for anyone who might feel far off. Perhaps we know Jesus and yet as we read these words, as we hear them, as we think about them, we feel actually that accusation of being lukewarm might actually describe our own hearts.

[24 : 33] well, the great comfort is that we don't need to stay lukewarm. Jesus is standing at the door and he's knocking. Perhaps we've never actually opened that door at all before.

Perhaps we've never known Jesus for ourselves. We've never taken that leap to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and follow him. Well, his words have relevance to you too.

He's standing at the door. The invitation is real. For others, this stands as a warning because the world is always calling us.

The world is like the sirens of Greek myth whose beautiful songs would lure sailors to their deaths.

To stay the course and be victorious, to use the language of revelation, will involve constantly coming back to Jesus, coming back to his gospel and rooting ourselves in the promises of all he has done for us.

That's what we have to do as Christians, is keep coming back to him, eating with him, meeting with him, enjoying that relationship with him as his bride. And so, briefly and finally, our final point, the uncompromised victory.

[25 : 52] Because this is where things lead if we have opened that door to Jesus. In common with each of the letters that have gone before in this series of seven letters, the letter to Laodicea ends with a promise and a hope.

What is the Christian striving towards? What are these riches that Jesus has mentioned, these riches that surpass the wealth of the world? Why is it worth opening the door and joining the bride of Christ?

Well, Jesus says this, 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.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The victory that Jesus is speaking about, in which Jesus won, was twofold.

He won the victory over our sin by bearing all of our sins on the cross. His death took away all the guilt and judgment that we deserve. And he won the victory over death.

[27 : 02] By his resurrection, he triumphed over death because he was raised to life. And he has and will never ever die again. And so, in honor of his victory, a victory that he won on our behalf, Jesus ascended into heaven to receive honor, power, and royal authority.

The victorious son sat down with the father on his throne. And it's a mark of his victory. He had won. The late scenes, they put their hopes in good things now.

They wanted Christ, but they also wanted the world. What Jesus reminds them is that if they only have him, well, they will have a new world in time.

But if they choose the world, well, they will reap only dust and the justice of God. And just as Jesus sat down on his father's throne, he promises his people that if they persevere to the end, then they will sit down with Jesus on his throne.

Now, I really do try and resist using too many C.S. Lewis illustrations, but I really can't think of a better one than this. At the end of the first Narnia book, The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, a great victory has been won over the evil power, the white witch.

[28 : 32] She has been defeated, she will trouble Narnia no more. And Aslan, the great king of Narnia, he crowns the four children who we've followed in the story, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, they are all crowned at the end together in a ceremony.

And Aslan doesn't stop being king, but he shares his throne with these four children who rule under him together, ushering in a new golden age of Narnia.

And so it is with Christians and with the church. When Jesus returns, when he makes his promise of a perfect new creation, a reality, well, what's going to happen is we are going to reign together with him.

He doesn't stop being king, but actually we get to enjoy not just living under him, but actually reigning with him. And every time I read the line, the witch and the wardrobe, I'm struck more and more by Edmund's story.

Edmund is the brother who sells out his family to the white witch. He sells them for a taste of Turkish delight. And yet Aslan dies for him.

[29 : 49] And Aslan rises for him. And Aslan gives him a seat on the throne just the same as his three siblings. Laodicea were a church who were lukewarm and compromised.

And perhaps we are, or have been in the past, or perhaps we will be in the future. Like Laodicea and like Edmund, Jesus has died for us.

He has risen for us. And he invites us to sit on his throne with him if we persevere to the end.

The victory Jesus has won was without compromise because he didn't compromise one bit. what's really remarkable is that he won that victory for us who so often do compromise.

And so as we finish, we have a choice. Jesus or the world, victory or defeat, compromise or Christ.

[31 : 00] Jesus is standing at the door and knocking. I wonder how will you answer?