

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Laodicea: One Option for Survival

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. (Revelation 3:19–21, KJV 1900)

A church should be made up of informed, devoted believers who seek God's will and strive to obey it. The operative word is "Should." In a broken, fallen world, even believers slip, one gradual step at a time over the edge of the slippery slope of compromise into Laodicean-like rebellion from the Lord and His commandments. Most of the epistles written to churches in the New Testament were written to churches with problems, and the inspired letters confront those problems, along with God's commandments to correct them. Error is not hopeless. We read the letter to Laodicea in this context, and we probably leave the letter with a smoldering dislike of that church. While the Lord strongly disapproved of her conduct, and exposed it to His bright righteous light, He gives even Laodicea one last opportunity to return to Him and recover from her sinful compromises, to repent.

Being a pastor exposes one to many less-than-perfect situations—and people—in churches. You hear the rationalizations that people imagine to justify their sinful departure from their faith and its Biblical, ethical obligations. You see the wrecked lives that inevitably result from this sinful conduct. The path of righteousness is not so complex that you need to be a scientist to understand it and to live it. It is actually quite simple. When you see a believer describe his/her life and discipleship as so complicated as to be next to impossible, beware of compromise. Does God in Scripture leave us in doubt as to what is righteousness and what is sin? Various percentage figures appear from time to time, but I have no doubt that at least ninety percent of the Bible addresses the challenges of life for a believer in Christ, along with God's directions—commandments, not neutral suggestions—for solving the challenge so as to glorify God. A believer set on compromise inevitably strives to do two things. 1) Dumb down the Bible and pretend that the Bible "...is a wonderful book, but it doesn't say a thing about my problem, so God must be willing to allow me to give it my best, and He'll simply bless my sincerity." 2) Depict the problem as so complicated and void of clear answers in Scripture, leaving me "...bewildered and without any clear, Biblical answers for my unique problem." Both answers ignore the teachings of Scripture and

the incredible light that Scripture shines on our "Life under the sun," as Solomon described it in Ecclesiastes. This whole attitude actually comes under intense scrutiny in Ecclesiastes. Solomon confesses that he had the wealth and opportunity to pretty well try every sin and every lifestyle he cared to indulge. At the end of the day, Solomon came to the one and only righteous conclusion that is available. It isn't complicated or impossible at all.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 KJVP)

We complicate our moral/ethical choices when we choose to ignore God and God's commandments. Every believer who chooses to ignore God's commandments in favor of his/her "Complicated" solution inevitably faces the disaster of failure. You cannot ignore God and His commandments, choose your own way instead of His, and succeed.

Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the LORD. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:14-15 KJVP)

What does God command His people to do in this lesson, so often partially quoted and partially considered? Fear God, a term that commands us to respectfully regard and obey God, not react to Him with slavish horror. And serve Him in sincerity and in truth. Notice that Joshua didn't give us an option for either sincerity or truth; he **requires both** sincerity and truth. You encounter folks all the time who are as sincere as they can be, but who refuse to consider the simple truth of Scripture. Sincerity

requires self-examination and purification of our own attitudes. Truth required Israel in Joshua's day to take some painful steps, to make some major changes in their lives. The commandment to "...put away..." the false gods of Egypt and of their past indicates that they continued to hold some affinity for those gods. God's truth required them to change, to put those false gods out of their lives. Are we living with any false gods in our present conduct? No doubt we are. Are we willing to put them away so as to appear before our God in both sincerity and in truth?

Joshua's commandment to Israel was not a model for hell-bound sinners to buy a ticket to heaven. It was a commandment to God's children, Israel, to turn away from their sinful, compromised lives, and return to God. The commonly isolated quotation, "...choose you this day whom ye will serve..." is a shocking alarm to Israel. Their choice was simple! Serve God in sincerity and in truth, or face God and tell Him that you think serving Him is evil. Really? The only folks who were told to "...choose ye this day..." were the people who had already decided that serving God was evil, and they'd rather serve their pagan gods than repent and serve God.

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Many people read their Old Testament and fail to get past God's righteous judgments against Israel's sins. I read it and see those judgments, along with the sins that evoked God's righteous judgment. However, as I read these episodes, I see another theme far more prominently than divine severity. I see amazing mercy flowing to a rebellious and undeserving people. I see a loving God, pleading with His people to hear His commandments and to live them. The first time I read Hosea I was bewildered. Why would God command His prophet to marry a prostitute, and, upon her repeated infidelities, to pursue her and forgive her time after time? Eventually the point of Hosea dawned on me, and it became one of my favorite Old Testament books. Hosea was God's man with God's message, but he was not equipped to deliver that message to God's people until he had experienced with his bride the same repeated infidelities that God had experienced with His beloved Israel. Perhaps Hosea, more than any single Old Testament book, transformed my attitude toward the Old Testament.

As I read the letter to Laodicea, my dominant attitude is not one of love. I want to grab that church by its symbolic collar, shake her, and shout, "Don't you understand what you are doing? Don't you know the personal and moral devastation that you are heaping onto yourself?" For anyone who reads the Bible and believes it, there can be no doubt that consciously choosing to ignore God and walk our own sinful path never works. It always in the end comes face to face with God's righteous judgment.

But God's response to Laodicea is different. After confronting her sins, He affirms His love and, yet one more time, commands her to repent. How does a preacher deal with entrenched rebellion or error? We live in a day when sinful pride rules the day in too many churches. A preacher dares not "Rebuke" or confront the church for anything. Tell them to repent? What are you thinking? How will their pride react to such preaching? Preach sweetness and light to them. Pretend nothing is wrong, and hope that they'll eventually get over it. Will this compromised strategy work? Read the Old Testament Book of Judges to learn God's answer. ***It never works.*** You guarantee God's righteous judgment against such a church, no less than He sent that judgment against His Old Testament people. A sinful, compromised church has one—and only one—option for her survival with God's blessings. Repent and return to the Lord and to his ways. A compromised church may well appeal to a sufficient number of lukewarm believers to maintain large numbers, but so does the Church at Rome, at Salt Lake City, and any number of others whom we believe do not at all hold to Biblical truth. The decisive issue is not to be determined by how many noses you count on Sunday morning, but, regardless of the number of people in the pew, whether God is there or not in His blessing presence. He is always present; He is omnipresent. But He may be present to rebuke and to chasten, not to bless. Do you really want to face God's rebuke and chastening? It may not come ten minutes after your decision to ignore His commandments and to pursue your favorite sin or your favorite god, but never doubt His consistent warnings in Scripture. He shall appear in judgment, in rebuke and in fearful chastening. The consequences of sin are never lukewarm or moderate.

Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. Keep this analogy in its contextual setting. Who is behind the door? It is not a hell-bound sinner. It is a Laodicean Church. She has erected barricade after barricade between her Lord and herself. She has insulated and isolated herself from Him in every way she could. He doesn't ignore her barricades to fellowship between Himself and her. He pounds on the door; He shows her the precise things that she has erected between herself and Him. He gives her the solution. He promises to forgive, and to enter her "House" and renew His fellowship with her. But that promise comes with a firm condition. She must repent of her lukewarm, compromised lifestyle. Repentance is a highly distasteful word to a believer who is "Up to his eyeballs" in sin and in sinful pride. But it is one of the New Testament's most hopeful and encouraging words to the individual believer and to the convicted church. It is the roadmap for a path that returns to God and to His blessings. Are we prepared to follow that map?

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church
16434 Woodruff
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor