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Hot, Cold, and Lukewarm

A Lesson in Historical Context

By Ryan Habbena

QUESTION: What does Jesus mean in Revelation 3:15-16, where He states, “I wish you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot or cold, I will spit you out of My mouth”? Is he saying that it is better to not believe (i.e. be cold) than to be indifferent (i.e. lukewarm)?

ANSWER: This passage is one of the most misunderstood and misapplied in all of Scripture. I frequently hear the interpretation noted above. The misunderstanding of this particular passage is a great example of how contemporary ideas are often read into the Biblical text. In order to properly understand this portion of Scripture (and indeed all of Scripture), it is profitable to thoroughly examine the background and context of the passage.

The book of Revelation is one of the most unique books in all of Scripture. It combines the elements of an epistle, of prophecy, and of apocalyptic literature. The passage at hand occurs in the midst of the Lord’s commanded exhortations to the 7 churches of Asia.¹ Each church was exhorted in different matters and in various ways. The church in Laodicia is the church to which Jesus gave the “hot,” “cold,” and “lukewarm” rebuke. A careful reading of Jesus’ admonition reveals that this particular church had become focused on riches and wealth, with pride and spiritual complacency being the result. This is the general context and background of this passage.

What, then, does Jesus mean when He says He wishes they were either “hot or cold?” First, we must discover what Jesus is referring to here. When we examine the entirety of the preceding verse, Jesus clearly presents what He is specifically speaking of. He proclaims: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot” (Revelation 3:15a). Therefore, it is clear that the analogy of “cold, hot, and lukewarm” is directly related to their deeds. Yet, how are we to relate this analogy to “deeds”? An understanding of the historical background of the city of Laodicia in the first century sheds much light on this issue.

The city of Laodicia was located between the cities of Heiropolis and Colossae. Both of these cities were known for pure waters that flowed through them. Nearby Heiropolis had a spring flowing with hot, medicinal water. Nearby Colossae was known for its cold, refreshing mountain springs. Laodicia, on the other hand, was renowned for its dirty, lukewarm water, which visitors almost immediately spat out after tasting. In light of this, we can see that both “hot” (like a hot shower) and “cold” (like a refreshing drink) were considered both good and useful. Yet, the “lukewarm” water of Laodicia was of little good use.²

When we apply this background to the admonition Christ gave the church at Laodicia, it is evident He was using the “waters” as an analogy to their own spiritual situation. Instead of being useful in service for the Lord, as the hot and cold waters of the area were useful, they were comparable to the virtually useless water of their own city, and the Lord was about to rebuke them by “spitting them out of His mouth.”

In popular evangelical culture “hot” is often used to convey an idea of great

spiritual fervor (i.e. ‘on fire for Jesus’). “Cold,” on the other hand, is often used as to describe one as spiritually dead or unfeeling (i.e. ‘what a cold-hearted person’). These ideas, then, are incorrectly read into this text. The original audience would not have had such presuppositions. Rather, both “hot” and “cold” were considered good and useful, it was only “lukewarm” that had an overtly negative connotation. Therefore, Jesus is not stating that He would rather have the Laodicians overtly reject Him. Since “hot” and “cold” were considered good and useful, Jesus rebuke was directly related to their “lukewarmness” – their spiritual slothfulness.

It is clear the potential rebuke in this passage is intended for discipline, not punishment. This is made clear when we read further, Christ states: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore and repent” (Revelation 3:19a). We read of God’s disciplining love in Hebrews 12: “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprovved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives” (Hebrews 12:5b-6).

God will not tolerate sin and spiritual slothfulness in the lives of His children. This discipline may come in a variety of forms. We are not told exactly how Jesus disciplined the Laodicians. Given the severely admonishing tone of the letter, if they refused to repent it appears the discipline would have been nothing light. This passage should serve to both motivate and comfort us. It should motivate us in the fact that we have a Lord that will not tolerate spiritually slothful children. The Scriptures are clear that our God and Savior practices discipline. Yet, this should also comfort us. Our Lord will not allow sin to go unchecked in our lives – He is working to conform us into His glorious image.

He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share in His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness. (Hebrews 12:11)

End Notes

1. There has been considerable debate as to how the admonitions and exhortations to these 7 particular churches relate to the prophetic and apocalyptic nature of the book. A current popular interpretation views the 7 churches as representative of the various “ages of the Church” leading up to the Second Coming. This interpretation fails on many levels. In my opinion, the best interpretation of the 7 churches is they are indeed historical churches addressed in the first century. However, they were chosen to represent the collective states of the “church in general” throughout church history, especially immediately preceding the time of the Second Coming. In my estimation, this is the only interpretation that preserves both of the “near” and “far” elements evident in these admonitions and exhortations.

2. See: Robert H. Mounce, *NICNT The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) pp. 109-110