

# I HEAR YOU KNOCKING

## Sermon, August 19, 2018

### Text: Revelation 3:14-22



"CHRIST AT HEART'S DOOR"  
WARNER SALLMAN, 1953

As mentioned during the Time With the Children, who here hasn't heard the words of Jesus in Revelation 3:20 -- "Behold, I stand at the door and knock ..."? That verse is wonderfully depicted in the famous picture of Jesus knocking upon a door (*reproduced here and in the bulletin inserts*), a door that has no handle on the outside, a door that must be opened from within, a door representing the door to one's heart. Jesus is knocking, but you have to open up and invite Him in ... and if you do, He will enter your heart. Every time I see that picture, though, I have a flashback to a talk given by a youth leader when I was in high school, a speaker who didn't particularly care for the depiction of a gentle Jesus politely tapping on the door in this portrait. He envisioned a bloodied, powerfully built ex-carpenter Jesus bearing a HUGE wooden cross, and using that cross to BOOM, BOOM, BOOM **pound** on that heart's door, as if to say, "Can't you see *what I've done for you?! I love you, I want to come in and fellowship with you, I want to show you the way to Life, LET ME IN!*" By the way, "letting Jesus in" is not a "once and for all" decision as some aspects of American evangelicalism has led many to believe over the years; deciding to let Jesus in to fellowship with us in the everydayness of our lives is a decision we need to make countless times each and every day! He wants to come in, and be a part of everything

in our lives, and I do mean everything, but in too many life situations we reply as Smiley Lewis did in 1955 two years after Warner Sallman's picture was produced: "I hear you knocking, but you can't come in; I hear you knocking, go back where you been!" (*Fats Domino also made that tune popular in 1961, as did Welsh singer Dave Edmunds in 1970, both hitting number one in the charts*)<sup>1</sup>. No ... Jesus wants to come in, and He is patiently knocking, even when (*and perhaps ESPECIALLY when*) we may not want Him to "come in" and be a part of what we are doing ... but that's almost another sermon.

A little background about the context of this reading: Laodicea was the kind of city that kept winning those polls for the best place to live in the Roman Empire. Economically, it was very well off. The town (*geographically located in what is now modern-day Turkey*) was strategically located along a lucrative trade route. It had strong banking establishments and a large textile industry that produced a glossy black wool, which came from a strain of longhaired black sheep indigenous to the area and bred for the trade. It was also a popular retirement area for the wealthy. Laodicea even had something of a medical college that specialized in ophthalmology and otology (*eye and ear problems*); an eye salve used throughout the ancient world was developed and manufactured here. Roman historian Tacitus tells us when a devastating earthquake struck the region in 60 AD, the people of Laodicea just rebuilt the city with their own financial reserves; they refused all offers of aid from the Roman equivalent of FEMA.

This city was in great shape, except for one small problem - it wasn't near a fresh supply of drinking water. The town architects thought they had taken care of this problem. The town of Colossae six miles south was nourished by fresh mountain springs, so the Laodiceans imported cool fresh water from there through a stone aqueduct. Also, from the natural hot springs of Hierapolis five miles north, another stone aqueduct was built which allowed the water from the hot mineral springs to flow down to Laodicea. So, they had hot and cold running water! Sort of. However, like many good engineering ideas, this one didn't quite work. Fragments of these aqueducts remain to this day; the conduits were apparently badly narrowed by thick calcium carbonate deposits, slowing down the flow of the water to almost a trickle both ways, and particularly so with the mineral-laden water from the hot springs of Hierapolis. So, by the time the cold water arrived from Colossae, it had warmed up, and by the time the hot water made the full trip from Hierapolis, it had cooled down.<sup>2</sup>

This meant that much of the water in Laodicea was lukewarm, like a cup of coffee that has been sitting on the desk all day. Now this is where the preacher usually says it's understandable why Jesus would use the illustration of spitting such water out of His mouth, but I have always had some difficulty with that interpretation, because it just seemed so ... rude. A Jesus who simultaneously professes His enduring love for these people (verse 19), yet threatens to vomit them out of His mouth ... I always thought there must be more to it than that. Besides, lukewarm water is still potable; in fact, most of the water in the Middle East was lukewarm in those days before refrigeration. Well, I found there is more to it than that. One other factor comes into play. The hot water from Hierapolis was great for healing and for bathing, but it was not fit for drinking. Two summers ago (2015), Steve, Hannah and I bathed in a hot mineral pool near the Dead Sea; while very soothing and relaxing, the sulfur-laden water wasn't at

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DleY7J9kjq0>. Fats Domino version, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iU9f\\_MUBCSs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iU9f_MUBCSs). And Dave Edmunds in 1970, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry2td7q5ZMc>. If you listen carefully, you'll hear Edmunds incorporate the names of these other two singers.

<sup>2</sup> For additional information, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laodicea\\_on\\_the\\_Lycus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laodicea_on_the_Lycus) and <http://lavistachurchofchrist.org/LVanswers/2009/02-13b.html>

all potable... and it also left our bathing suits smelling like rotten eggs for the duration of our trip! No matter how many times we rinsed them out, the odor still permeated even to the day we unpacked and put everything in the laundry back home! While in that Dead Sea resort pool, a bit of that water inadvertently got in my mouth, and boy, did it ever sting ... I instinctively, involuntarily and immediately spit it out, and rushed to find fresh water to rinse out my mouth! Well, not only was much of the water in Laodicea mildly distasteful due to its lukewarm quality, some of it had become downright dangerous to drink. I've learned that cracks developed in some areas of the underground portions of the aqueducts, and in these areas the mineral-and-sulfur laden hot water from Hierapolis would mix with the pure mountain spring water from Colossae, resulting in a lukewarm mixture that was literally nauseating. One would know immediately if the water was contaminated; there was no waiting around to spit that water out ... in most cases, it was an involuntary reaction! So everyone understood Jesus' use of that imagery; it certainly would not have been considered rude ... such polluted water couldn't be ingested without serious effects on one's health.

So you have this great city, but everybody always cautioned visitors, "*Don't drink the water.*" I'm sure this water thing drove the Laodiceans crazy. It was a great town, a wonderful place to live, a strong economy, but it had this third world water problem. In Revelation 3:15, the Lord says to the church in Laodicea, "*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot.*" When He then goes on to call them "lukewarm," you can be sure they all grimaced. He hit them in their soft spot. Laodicea was proud of its financial wealth; it was a rich city and had need of nothing, or so it thought. Laodicea was proud of its clothing and textile trade; the garments made there with the luxurious black wool of the Laodicean sheep were famous throughout the known world. They were proud of their ophthalmologic and otologic advances; they were the world-renowned eye and ear medicine experts of the time. It was a great place to live, except for the water. That, they just could not get right. Jesus says to the Christians there in so many words, "*I know you wish your water system worked, you would love to have the cold clean refreshing water that nourishes and invigorates, and the hot medicinal waters that heal and soothe and comfort. You love your town, it's a great town, and you wish your water were cold or hot when appropriate ... but too often it is just this mildly distasteful, and sometimes nauseating, lukewarm. Well, I have the same problem with you! I love you (as He affirms in verse 19), you have so much going for you, but I know by your deeds and by your actions that you are lukewarm in your devotion to Me. And you know what happens when somebody in your town drinks this lukewarm water.*"

What went wrong? We don't really know, but we can speculate. Things between Jesus and the Christian community in Laodicea certainly didn't start out all that bad. Like the water that started out hot up north, the Christians in Laodicea began with hot faith. Early in their history they were fervent in their desire to bring healing and cleansing and comfort in Jesus' name, fervent in their desire to make a difference ... but somewhere along the way, they cooled down. And like the mountain spring water that started out cold from Colossae, early on they were refreshed and invigorated and eager to bring the bracing living water of faith to others. But along the way, it all just grew tepid. It seems that all their wealth, all their commerce and medicine, all their education and state of the art technology, all their hard work to build a good life for themselves had distracted the Laodicea church from the mission of Christ and even somewhat contaminated their devotion to Him, so much so that it kept them from hearing His knocking and letting Him into all areas of their lives ... their hearts, their homes, their livelihoods. And as a result, their faith became as tepid, and even potentially nauseating, as the lukewarm water of the city. Not to over simplify, but perhaps the major problem the people of Laodicea had was that they were so prosperous they could not see their need for the Savior ... which is a great danger for any church! "*You do not realize,*" says the Lord, "*that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.*" It was striking that Jesus told a rich city they were poor, that He told a city known for its textiles they were naked, and a city that specialized in eye treatments they were blind and could not see. Our achievements, or our misplaced confidence in our achievements, can be our undoing if they distract us from our primary relationship and devotion to Jesus Christ. So, Jesus says, "*I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; white clothes to wear, so you can cover your nakedness, salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Here I am. I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come and eat with him, and he with me.*"

This is an invitation given not just to the Laodicea church in general, but to every individual member of the church. Also note it is an invitation and offer primarily given to Christians, not just to those "outside" the faith. It is an offer of Jesus to come in and be a partner and companion with us in all the activities and relationships of our lives ... our business, our commerce, our families, our studies, our habits, even the common activity of household meals. But we **must** invite and welcome Him in, time and again! And trust me on this: He, the Living Water, will come in ... don't shut Him out. Don't say along with Smiley Lewis, et. al., "*I hear you knockin' but you can't come in ... at least right now!*" Don't say, "*I can handle this without you, Jesus, I don't want You to be a part of what I'm doing here; just stay outside!*" When He is present, our lives and deeds aided by His invigorating, refreshing Spirit can bring healing and soothing comfort to ourselves and others, like the hot waters of Hierapolis, and they can bring invigorating nourishment like the waters of Colossae. Apart from Him, however, our efforts become tepid, weak, even nauseating.

If another incentive was needed to invite Him in, read His promise in verse 21 ... the promise that if we do let Him in, one day He will reciprocate, and invite us in ... in to His heavenly home, to come and sit with Him on His throne. And then His final parting shot, which takes on additional poignancy when we remember the medical center of Laodicea was also renowned for otology as well as ophthalmology:

*"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* Amen.