

“The Perils of Self-Sufficiency”

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The self-reliance we strive for might be the worst thing that ever happened to us.

Revelation 3:14-22

May 21, 2017

The sermon I need to hear

Sometimes the sermon I plan to preach is the sermon I need to hear. The past few months at Corinth have presented one set of “over and above” challenges after another – 40-50 meetings about the Capital Campaign in January, forty Confirmation appointments in February, meeting with sixty people who attended the March Pastor’s Class, and three difficult funerals on Saturdays since Easter weekend. There are some responsibilities that seem to fall uniquely on my shoulders as senior pastor. More of them cropped up in the past six weeks, and I needed to rise to the challenge. Or did I?

In preparation for this sermon, I came across a blog titled, “[A Self-Reliant, Self-Sufficient America is a Safe and Secure America.](#)” Here is the heart of the key sentence: “For the majority of our history...America as a nation was...self-reliant and self-sufficient.” A historian might argue for or against that statement. A pastor needs to ask, “Is that a good thing?” Is it good for a nation to be self-reliant and self-sufficient?

Let’s bring that closer to home. Is it healthy for a church to be “self-reliant and self-sufficient”? What about families? Individuals? Is the best thing for people and communities to have responsibility and opportunity unhindered by others?

We tend to ponder the downside of dependence, but is there a downside of independence? Historically, what happens to nations that are so powerful they are self-reliant? What happens to churches and individuals who need nothing and no one?

Making our way through the book of Revelation we arrive at a text that addresses these questions. It is a supreme irony that the self-sufficiency and self-reliance we seem programmed to strive for, if achieved, might be the worst thing that ever happened to us.

Message to Laodicea

The letter to Laodicea in Revelation 3 is the seventh and final of the letters Jesus gave to John to send by envoys from his exile on the island of Patmos to the clockwise postal route in western Asia (modern Turkey). This one is different from the others in that it doesn't seem to have any commendation in it, at least at first glance.

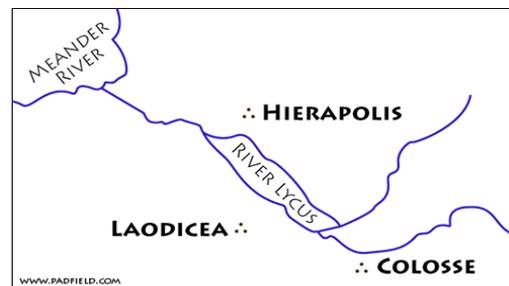
The letter begins, as do all the others, with a self-description from Jesus. In this case he describes himself as "the Amen, the faith and true witness, the ruler of God's creation" (14). There are so many allusions in Revelation to the Old Testament, including this one, which seems to come from Isaiah 65:16 which speaks of "the God of Amen."

Contrary to popular belief, "Amen" doesn't mean "the end" in a prayer. It means "Yes!" It means, "That's true!" It means, "Let it be so!" It's a word of affirmation, of agreement. Jesus says to this church, "You can trust me, because I'm the origin and sovereign over every square inch of God's world."

Verse 15 begins, "I know your deeds." That's a phrase used in several of the letters, and usually what follows is a commendation of their perseverance, their faith, and their service. If you've read the other letters, you're expecting Laodicea also to be commended for the great things they are doing under difficult circumstances. Instead, Jesus says, "You make me sick."

More literally, in verses 16-17 he uses a rather famous analogy about hot, cold, and lukewarm water. He says they're not hot or cold, and he wishes they were one or the other. Because they're lukewarm, he's going to vomit them.

Many commentators say that the reference here is to Laodicea's one municipal flaw. They don't have a good water source, and have to pipe in water from Hierapolis using an aqueduct. By the time it gets to the city, it's not only lukewarm but foul-tasting because of a concentration of minerals. I'm a little puzzled by that, because (a) the use of aqueducts in ancient Rome was common, (b) there was a fresh water river closer than Hierapolis, and (c) the city was so popular and thriving. [One ancient source](#) even commends Laodicean water.



I do think Jesus is using the hot springs of nearby Hierapolis and the cool springs of nearby Colosse, both of which would have been well-known to Laodiceans, to make a point. Hot water heals. Cold water refreshes. Lukewarm water nauseates. But what exactly does he mean by calling them "lukewarm"? The rest of the letter clarifies.

"You say," he writes, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." In our parlance, "I'm good." The urban language dictionary says "I'm good" is a stronger

way to say what my generation would say, “No thank you.” It conveys “satiation.” In other words, I’m already satisfied. But it can even be sarcastic. Someone says, “Would you like some milk with your wine?” “No, I’m good.” It’s the response to a pickup line in a bar. “Can I come over to your place and give you a back rub?” “No, I’m good.”

Jesus says, “You think you’re good, but you’re not.” Well, he says it stronger than that. In verse 17 he uses five words to describe them –

- Wretched – a compound word indicating a body covered with callouses
- Pitiful – miserable, the kind of person others feel sorry for
- Poor – destitute, like a beggar
- Blind – the same word used of all those blind people Jesus healed
- Naked – exposed, either stark-naked or stripped to undergarments

Let’s summarize vv. 16-17: “You think you’re rich and you say, ‘I’m good.’ In reality, you’re miserable, pitiable beggars who should be embarrassed by your self-exposure but can’t even see it.”

In verses 18-20 Jesus gives his counsel to them.

First, come to me. He uses metaphors from their world of finance, textiles, and medicine: “Buy *from me* refined gold, white clothes, and eye salve.” You’re trying to satisfy your needs elsewhere. Come *to me*.

Laodicea was a self-reliant and self-sufficient city. Tacitus (AD 56-120), a Roman historian, noted the earthquake that devastated Laodicea and nearby cities in AD 60 and added, “Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us.” “Us” refers to the Roman Senate. Can you imagine New Orleans declining federal aid after Hurricane Katrina in 2005? “We don’t need your money. We’re good.”

How did Laodicea become so wealthy? First, location, location, location. The city was built in a fertile river valley that joined two trade routes and two rivers. Antiochus II founded the city about 250 BC and named it after his wife (perhaps also his sister), Laodice. (Not long after, he divorced her.) Syrians immigrated there to found the city. So many Jews arrived from Babylonia that their rabbis complained of those who sought the wines and baths of Phrygia.

The businesses that grew up in this area included a prosperous textile industry, focused on breeding sheep with a soft, glassy wool that made for fine carpets and clothes. Laodicea also boasted one of a number of medical centers in the region, including the production of a powder ground from stone in the region that was effective as an eye-salve. Aristotle and Galen, the ancient Greek physician, referred to this product.

Second, repent. The most tender words in the letter are in verse 19: “Those I love I rebuke and discipline. The word “love” is the verb form not of *agape* but *philos*. It’s

“friendship love” – family love, the kind of love where you have something in common and enjoy being together.

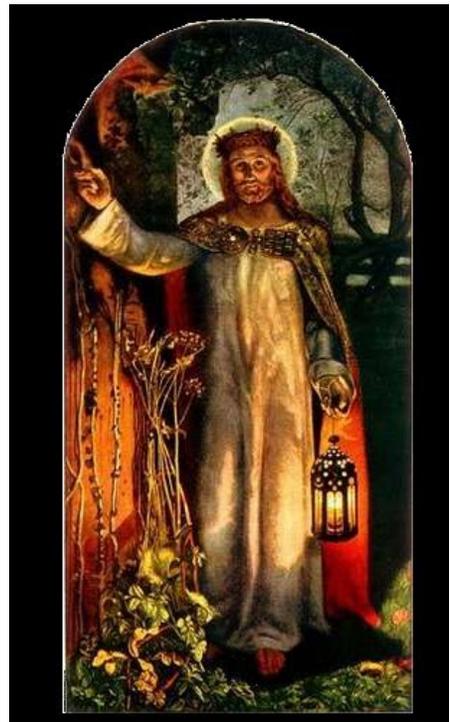
The story that comes to mind is about Doug Shiplett, my best friend in college, the best man in our wedding. We bonded early in our freshman year, in spite of our differences. He was a night person, and I was a morning person. On Saturdays I’d rather get up and get breakfast before the cafeteria closed. He’d rather sleep in. I was schedule and goal-oriented. He was more impulsive. Our freshman year we both had girlfriends back home, so we had social time to hang around each other. He later married that girl back home; I broke up with my girlfriend and it’s a good thing because before long I radically traded up when I started dating Linda.

Sometime in our sophomore year, however, my relationship with Doug hit a snag. My time was now more limited because I had a love interest on campus. Doug and I were roommates, but we were no longer hanging out much. I remember saying to him something like, “Well, how about Thursday after class?” He snapped back, “Don’t schedule me in!” Doug was hurt that my other interest didn’t leave me much time for him. Best friends should prioritize each other, be available for each other.

That’s the basic idea of what Jesus is saying to the Laodicean church: “My *dear friends*, I miss you! You don’t think about me, don’t come to me, don’t need me. And since I love you, I’m scolding you and I will discipline you. So be earnest and repent.”

This is Jesus’ explanation of “lukewarm.” The verb “be earnest” is from the noun “zeal” – *zeloo*. It’s an onomatopoeic word, which means it is supposed to sound like what it means – like bark, bubble, clang, flush, hum, toot, or zoom. What sound is it imitating? Boiling water. Jesus wants them hot. Jesus wants their zeal, their passion. He’d rather they be cold than lukewarm, because at least then they know how far they are from him. When Jesus is on the sidelines of a self-sufficient life because “I’m good” on my own, we make him want to vomit. He says, “Don’t schedule me in” to your life on Sunday mornings or when your small group meets or during your daily prayers. I want intimacy with you all through every day. I love you. You need me.

Third, open the door. Verse 20 is one of the most intimate images in the Bible. I’ve heard it used many times for evangelism, but Jesus is writing to the church at Laodicea, to the churches. William Holman Hunt painted the most well-known depiction of this scene, and it’s said that when the picture was unveiled someone said, “It’s not finished. There’s no handle on the door.” Holman replied, “That’s because the door to



the human heart can only be opened from the inside.” Every artistic rendition of this verse that I’ve seen, including the stained glass window in the Rowe Welcome Center, has no handle on the outside of the door.

Jesus will not force his way in. Linda and I recently listened to C. S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters*. Lewis depicts this unwillingness of God to push through the door from the outside as something the devil thoroughly understands. Screwtape, a senior devil training his protégé on how to tempt humans, talks about how God uses suffering to draw humans to him, and adds,

One must face the fact that all the talk about His love for men, and His service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself – creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. We want cattle who can finally become food; He wants servants who can finally become sons.

In Holman’s painting, the door is overgrown with weeds and vines. Jesus has been there a long time. His patience is amazing. He loves this Laodicean church that has neglected their deepest need for far too long. Remember who Jesus is? The Amen, the faithful and true, the trustworthy one.

Finally, this letter ends in 21-22 as all the others do, with a promise to the overcomer. In this case, the promise is to share in the future reign of Christ. This promise is previewed elsewhere in the New Testament (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; 2 Timothy 2:12), but this is really a setup for the next two chapters, where Jesus is worshiped in heaven. If you have ears to hear, listen up! Future glory with Jesus is so much better than any success or wealth this world can offer.

Self-sufficiency

More than anything else, this letter highlights the perils of self-sufficiency. Although I do not subscribe to the theory that the letters in Revelation outline the stages of church history, I see so much parallel between Laodicea and the modern American church. We are rich, we are prosperous, we are self-reliant. And if we’re not, we want to be. It’s an American value.

I asked my Bible study group on Thursday to help me do some application of this text and this principle. First, I asked them in what areas is self-sufficiency a potential problem. Do any of these sound familiar to you?

- Finances – I want to have enough money not to be dependent on anyone.
- Health – I want to be able to live in my own home, drive my car, get around without help, not need anyone’s help for basic functioning.

- Relationships – I don't need anyone's help or guidance about my marriage or parenting or friendships or job.
- Addictions – I can quit anytime I want, and I can do it myself.
- Beauty – I know what makes me look good to others, attracting attention to my appearance and making me more desirable.
- Power – I want to be the boss, to be in charge, to be in control.
- Spirituality – I want to choose when and how I relate to God, how often I go to church or meet with my group or serve in ministry. My relationship with God is personal, and I follow those parts of the Bible that most fit me.
- Schedule – My time and priorities are my own. I can get everything done that I need to.

On Thursday in my mind I was going to write a really powerful, insightful conclusion to this sermon. I ran out of time and out of steam, and besides, the need to do that for this or any other sermon illustrates the problem of self-sufficiency in a pastor's life. Sometimes I have to let go of the need to be profound. In reality, the simple outline my Bible study group came up with is enough. In my world and yours, there are three basic ways to deal with any of those areas, with any area of life.

Option one: "I've got this." That's a variant on "I'm good." I can handle this.

Option two: "We've got this." The complementary danger of self-sufficiency is codependency. When two or more people create a relationship where both need to be needed by the other, that's also unhealthy.

Option three: "God's got me." This is the place of trust in the Amen, the faithful and true witness. Do you know why I think we don't open the door to Jesus? It might be because "I've got this" or "We've got this." But it might also be that we're trying to clean up before we let him in. It might be we don't want to be vulnerable enough to let him see the mess that we've made of our lives. He waits patiently. He won't barge in. But he'd love to be invited into the mess. What he really longs for is for his friends to let him hang out in all of life, be a part of every conversation and decision, even in the ordinary.

What does it look like to let him in? It means to create spaces and seasons where we slow down – slow down to think, to pray, to read Scripture, to meditate, to allow some fresh input into our lives. Sometimes that's a vacation and sometimes it's just a walk or a nap or a day of rest.

"But what about all this other stuff I won't get done?" Exactly. Do I trust in my own self-sufficiency, efficiency, and ability? Or do I trust the Amen, the faithful and true witness? He alone is enough. Amen.