

The Investment Counselor

by Steve Zeisler

Yesterday I officiated at my sister's wedding. It was a great occasion. I watched my father walk my sister down the aisle. The groom was crying, the best man was crying, and my mother was crying. I thought to myself, 'I've got to hold this thing together or we're all going to come unstuck.' I realized I was a pastor, a servant of the Lord, representing him, and I was a brother to my little sister who was getting married. I was in a role where I was an advisor, a counselor to this couple and I wanted to do that faithfully and successfully; to urge them to have the proper foundations for their marriage, to stand for the right things, to have godliness at the center of their lives.

There is a passage in the seventh and last letter of Jesus to the churches in the book of Revelation where the counsel of Christ, the advice of the Master, is central. What should be our goals? What is worth giving ourselves to? What should we avoid? In the 18th verse of Revelation 3, Jesus said, 'I advise you, buy from Me gold refined by fire.' He is, in a very real sense, an investment counselor who has advice on where to put our treasure and where to invest ourselves.

Revelation 3:14:

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the beginning of the creation of God, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who over comes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Have you noticed that someone is always ready to offer you advice on how you should live? The newspapers every day offer columns of it. The 'Dear Abby' column, 'Advice to the Lovelorn,' horoscopes, etc., all offer to help you find direction for your day. In the sports section, touts advise on how to bet the horses. Investment counsel floods the business pages. Health and beauty tips are freely available in the 'Home and Living' sections. All manner of choices, options and directions are available to us, it seems. But here in Revelation, Jesus has a word of advice to the church at Laodicea, and to us as well, on what is really valuable. Let me urge you, as he urges, 'Take this advice.' This is one Investment Counselor to whom we should pay attention.

'The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this,' he writes. He is the Amen, the last and final Word of truth, the glorious Amen, the end of everything. >From the very first, arching across creation and human history, the beginning and the end, the amen and the beginning, the faithful and true Witness--it is he who is telling us this truth. He is going to urge us to make our choices at his direction. 'I advise you, buy from Me gold refined by fire.' What better Investment Counselor could we ask for?

You can hardly read this short letter without seeing that there is a clash of values here. The Lord will contrast his analysis with what this church thought of itself. They had said of themselves, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy.' Together with this they had made the terrible claim, 'I have need of nothing.' What a horrible thing for a Christian church to say! 'I am rich. I have all the resources I need. I can spend what I need for what I

desire. I know no limits.' The rich regard themselves somehow as special. They see themselves in a category that sets them apart, exalted above others. They feel they are deserving of special treatment- first class accommodations, the respect of those whom they consider their inferiors-- all of these things insinuate themselves into the hearts of those who say, 'I am rich and have need of nothing.'

But the church in Laodicea went even further, claiming to have 'become' rich, claiming, 'By my own hand I have acquired wealth. I am cleverer, more courageous, more aggressive than others. Thus I create wealth by dint of my own efforts.' Then finally, awfully, 'I have need of nothing. I am secure. My possessions, together with my talents and abilities have provided for my security. I am protected from all dangers, insulated from all problems, immune to all tragedies.' In these words, Jesus articulates for them what they feel inside in words they themselves would probably not dare speak aloud.

Then we hear his analysis of this church in Laodicea. He uses some very painful, picturesque and difficult terms to describe them. Their spiritual life is 'lukewarm,' he says. That is a terrible thing to say of any relationship. Three times he says, 'It is neither hot nor cold.' He wishes it were one or the other, anything rather than this tasteless, disgusting, lukewarm condition. Obviously, it would be better if the church were hot, if it had fervor, passion and love for Jesus and for the things of Christ. But if they could not be hot it would be better for them to be ice cold. People who oppose and resist the gospel obviously take it seriously, at least. They, very likely, can be counted amongst those who are 'kicking against the goads,' as was Saul of Tarsus at one time. Saul hated the Christian message, but he knew it was powerful. Finally, when he could no longer kick against the prods of our Lord, Paul came to faith, to fervent, heated Christianity.

Apathy and lukewarmness are the worst possible condition in any relationship. There is hope for a relationship when there is a faint spark remaining, even if that spark is a spark of anger. Hope has all but disappeared in marriages where either one or both parties no longer cares what the other says or does. The same could be said of relationships between parents and children. That is why Jesus says to the church at Laodicea 'You have become lukewarm. Even coldness is better than lukewarmness.' He speaks of his disgust at their condition in the most graphic of ways: 'You make me sick. I would vomit you out of my mouth.' He threatened the removal of the lamp stand of the church in Ephesus. He threatened others that he would make war on them. He threatened them with pestilence; he even threatened he would come 'as a thief in the night.' But none of the things he said to any of those churches to awaken them and correct them is as hard to hear as this word, 'My stomach is turned by what I see among you.' Claiming to represent him, their arrogant self-satisfaction was sickening to him.

Further, he turns the table on them. 'You say you are rich and talented, that you have no needs, but I say you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.' The city of Laodicea was very wealthy. They had a reputation as a center for the manufacture of woollen clothing. Laodicea also was famous for a medicine, a salve, which was used worldwide in the treatment of eye disease. That is why the Lord reverses what they thought were their assets and tells them, 'You are poor, blind and naked. You do not see yourself as you really are.' What an enormous chasm existed between how they regarded themselves and his description of them. That is where this message has to begin. We have to hear his hard analysis. We have to see his reaction to the blindness into which these people had fallen. Only then can we avail ourselves of the kind of help he offered them.

Consider the words of Jesus about wealth. We should remember that there is no consistent message in scripture which says that the rich ought to dispose of their wealth and become poor--although some should do so. Jesus directed the rich young ruler to do exactly that. There are probably many among us who ought to ask whether or not the Lord wants them to give substantially more than they are giving. But it is not the consistent message of scripture that everybody who owns things ought to give away all they have. It is, however, the consistent message of scripture (and we see it reflected in these verses) that people who have money (as well as those who don't) should stop valuing it above everything else. The Word clearly teaches that money is not as valuable as we think, that material possessions do not really amount to much.

We should stop judging ourselves and others based on how much money, income, or property we control. We should stop deriving any sense of security from whether or not we own things at present or are projecting that at some future point we will have certain possessions. We should stop loving and hoarding money. We should not live in an ostentatious manner and segregate ourselves from others based on ownership of material things.

If the only people we invite to our homes are those of our own social stratum, that should cause us to question our motives. Do we segregate ourselves on the basis of money and possessions? Do we have friendships and interests that cross these artificial barriers, or are we imprisoned behind them? Are we resentful of needy people whom the Lord directs us to help, feeling they want to take something valuable away from us? Would we rather keep for ourselves what the Lord directs us to share with the needy? I believe the Lord is saying to these Laodiceans, 'You have placed too high a value on money. But money is not that important. It does not accomplish anything that will last forever.' Surely the church at Laodicea had made those mistakes. Stop giving so much weight and importance to money, is the heart of the Lord's message to them.

If money is not that valuable then, what should we value? Our Investment Counselor tells in verse 18: 'I advise you, then, buy from Me gold refined by fire that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.' We should value 'gold that is refined by fire.' Jesus is speaking of character. What are we becoming on the inside? What values have been ingested so thoroughly that they are yours and cannot be taken away? Is your character becoming beautiful and pure, a delight to God? Seek from him the kind of choices that will allow you to become valuable as a person, that will allow your heart to weigh something and your character to be worth something. That is worth having. Acquire white garments to cover shameful nakedness. Do good works that reflect the glory of God. Wear as your adornment beautiful, winsome activities in life. That is how we should clothe ourselves. In the third chapter of Zechariah there is a description of the high priest being stripped of filthy clothes (iniquity) and, at the direction of the Lord, robed in clean and beautiful garments. We, too, should put away the things that are wrong and clothe ourselves with righteous activities, good works of service to God.

Finally, he says, 'If you want to see things as they really are, forget the medicine that you produce here and take from me instead the medicine that will give you real understanding.' Learn to value what the Lord values. Learn to see life as he sees it. Learn to care about the things that he cares about, to become wise as he is wise, so that we may see the world with the eyes of Christ rather than the wisdom of the world.

The last section of this letter takes on a very different tone than the opening verses. Gone are the references about God being sick of his own people, his disgust at their lukewarmness, of their awful self-induced blindness that makes them worship money and possessions. This strong language gives way in verse 19 to a loving tenderness. Here he refers to 'those whom I love,' and 'those who overcome' (verse 21). Clearly, even from the church in Laodicea! he intends to win some back; he intends that good be done there.

There are three things we should pay attention to in this last section. First, Jesus says, 'The ones whom I love I reprove and discipline.' He is serious. He invades our lives and makes changes. He refuses to put up with what he sees wrong but steers us on a new course. He forces us to see things we would just as soon not see. All of this he does for those whom he loves. Be zealous. Repent. Be hot, no lukewarm. He will insist on changes to bring beauty in the character of those whom he loves. He will reprove and discipline us until he accomplishes that. The harsh language, the difficult things, the shame we feel as we see ourselves for what we really are- all of that is part of the loving hand of our Lord molding us into what we ought to be.

I am amazed at the humility demonstrated in the second thing Jesus says in this last section: 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.' May I be your friend again? he is asking. May I eat with you? May I involve myself with you and interact with you? May I put my arm around you again? He does not force his way in. He makes the offer and invites, not demands, a response. The Master of all asks, 'May I make the changes that need to be made?'

Beyond that, he promises 'If you will overcome, if you will see what you have become and repent and become zealous, if you will allow me back into your life where you have excluded me, then you will overcome in the years you have to live. Then the day will come when you will sit with me on my throne because I too overcame and I have been allowed to sit on my Father's throne.' The Ruler of all, seated on his throne in glory, invites his servants to sit with him.

One of my favorite accounts in the Bible is the story of Zacchaeus' meeting with Jesus. Zacchaeus was

despised by his fellow-Jews because he had sold out to the Romans and become a tax collector. He was also a cheat who grew rich by overcharging people on their taxes. Physically, Zacchaeus was short in stature. Perhaps his choice to serve Rome was a way of getting back at those who had ridiculed and excluded 'the little man.' In an effort to make up for his lack of physical stature he probably adorned himself in rich man's clothing. Very likely he considered himself insightful. He was one who saw things as they really were and used that insight to his advantage, becoming rich in the process. Zacchaeus the brilliant, Zacchaeus the insightful had need of nothing.

At a certain point in his life, however, he became Zacchaeus the tragic. The facade had begun to crack. Certain needs he felt became harder and harder to deny. It was rumored that God had stirred among his people. Perhaps the Messiah had come. Why, some said he would even visit Zacchaeus' village very soon. On that day little Zacchaeus climbed a tree to get a good look at this Messiah. The Lord passed underneath this tree, looked up and said, 'Zacchaeus, come down. Tonight I will eat in your house. Tonight I want to become your friend.' Jesus stands at the door of the hearts of his people who have excluded him and knocks. 'May I come in?' he asks. He stood beneath the tree and said, 'Zacchaeus, let us eat together in your house.' At last Zacchaeus recognized his own need. Suddenly the riches he had gained became the means for ministry and he no longer valued them. He repaid those he had cheated even more than he had taken from them. Now he had something to live for. He had found that money in and of itself was valueless. On his own he had become rich, and tried to believe that he had need of nothing. But in Jesus he had found true riches. He became a changed man.

According to the advertising supplements, now is the time to order your fall fashions. Perhaps now too is the time to have a complete physical examination. Now may be the time to have your eyes checked out. It is a good idea to check periodically on your investments, your insurance policies, etc., and make sure everything is as it ought to be. You may even need to seek advice from an investment counselor. It is a wise thing to periodically review all those things. Yet, as much as we are willing to attend to our physical health, to bodily adornment and to investment of our money (and we have just seen how little these things really count), how much more should we be willing to hear the advice of this Investment Counselor: 'Buy from me gold that is refined by fire. Use the remaining days of your life to make choices to become something, not just to own something, but to become something. Adorn yourself with righteous activities. Begin to act in such a way that there is a beauty about you that reflects the beauty of God.'

Those things are worth having. That is a review that is worth making. Allow your eyes to be treated so that you can see with the wisdom of the Lord rather than by the wisdom of the world. We need to heed this advice or risk sinking into the disgusting state of the church in Laodicea. Are we investing ourselves in acquiring worthless possessions rather than in 'gold refined by fire'?

What incredible humility Jesus displays here! He does not insist on being allowed in. He does not burst through the door. He gives advice, but he does not require that we take it. But we had better hear his advice and listen to his counsel. The glory of sharing his throne is too great to sacrifice and the wretchedness of lukewarm Christianity is too shameful to approach. Let each of us determine to be among those who overcome.

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