

Wake Up and Get to Work:

Revelation

3:14-22

by Bob Wilkin

September 11, 2001 was a wakeup call for America. Even though there were warnings, we weren't prepared for what happened. We didn't heed the wake up calls that had come to us.

Complacent believers need wake up calls too.

This is especially true when believers have an inflated view of their walk with the Lord.

It is possible for believers to be spiritually lazy and yet at the same time think they are serving the Lord well. That was the problem with the Church at Laodicea. The Lord gave them a wakeup call, as well as to all believers who are listening. It is found in Rev 3:14-22.

This is the last of seven letters. All seven letters concentrate on works, not faith. The statement "I know your works" appears in all seven letters. There is no call to faith in any of the letters since all are addressed to genuine believers.

The seventh letter divides nicely in three parts. Part 1 of the letter is the prologue (v 14). Part 2 of the letter is the wakeup call (vv 15-21). The problem being addressed is in verses 15-17. The solution the Lord offers is found in verses 17-20. The possible rewards are stated in verse 21. Part 3 of the letter is the epilogue (v 22).

PROLOGUE: THE ONE CALLING DESERVES TO BE HEARD

Jesus is the one calling upon this church to wake up. Who is Jesus? John says three things about Him. First, He is "the Amen." That means that He is true and right. Second, He is a perfect witness, one that is faithful and true. Third, He is the Creator. He was not the first created being. But He is uncreated, eternal. The point of v 14 is clear: the one calling deserves to be heard.

THE PROBLEM: SPIRITUAL POVERTY, BLINDNESS, NAKEDNESS (vv 15-17)

Very simply the problem is this: *the works* of the Laodicean believers nauseated the Lord.

Many people wrongly think that hot water is good and cold water is bad. Thus they think that we should be hot in our service for Christ, not cold.

Yet if that were true, these verses make no sense. Why would Jesus *prefer* believers to be *cold* in their service for Him over them being *lukewarm* in their service for Him? Obviously if *hot is good* and *cold is bad*, then lukewarm is better than cold.

But both hot and cold are good here. Hot water is good to drink. So, too, is cold water. However, lukewarm water is not.

The Laodicean believers were like lukewarm water. That is, they were not pleasing to the Lord. Their works displeased Him. Believers whose works are displeasing to the Lord face the possibility of divine discipline. Just as one might spit lukewarm water out of his mouth, so the Lord warns that He is about to judge the Laodicean believers.

Thus the Lord is saying that if the Laodicean believers don't wake up right away and change their behavior, He is going to discipline them, possibly to the point that He will take them home prematurely and remove the witness of this church.

The problem is even worse because not only are their works bad, but in addition, the Laodicean believers don't even realize they have a problem. They think they have it all together both materially and spiritually.

Note what the believers in Laodicea say in verse 17. They say that they are rich and have become wealthy.

They are saying that they have need of nothing. Yet the truth is they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

Many wrongly think that these adjectives can't refer to believers. But that is precisely who they are directed toward!

The issue here is not the *position* of the readers. The issue is the *experience* of the readers.

Christians who are morally asleep, whose works are displeasing to God, are spiritually wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked, even if they might be wealthy, well clothed, living in fine homes, driving nice cars, and have 20-20 vision. *Physical* prosperity and health are not necessarily a true indication of *spiritual* prosperity and health.

Actually the believers in Laodicea were wealthy in a physical sense. They were also well-clothed. And they were known for an eye salve that they produced. So they thought since they were physically sound, they were spiritually sound too.

The first part of the wakeup call states the problem: Wake up! Your works are bad! Your attitude is bad!

THE SOLUTION: REPENT AND BE ZEALOUS (vv 17-19)

Part of the solution, according to v 17, is to *recognize that we have a problem*.

If you are not actively serving Christ, the first step to the solution is to admit your works are not right and that you need to change.

Even if you are walking closely with the Lord, you need to be reminded that the Lord is concerned about your works. He knows your works and He cares how you live. Past good works do not give us a right to coast now. We must keep on doing good if we wish to continue to please the Lord (cf. Gal 6:9).

Admission of the need to change should be followed by an actual change in behavior. This is brought out in vv 18-20.

Verses 18 and 20 paint word pictures to illustrate the point.

Verse 19 removes the figures of speech and says clearly what needs to be done.

Let's look first at v 19 since if we understand it clearly it will make understanding vv 18 and 20 much easier.

The Lord gives two commands, "Be zealous and repent" (v 19). They needed to be zealous *for good works*. They needed to repent *of bad works, wrong motives, and spiritual lethargy*.

The words "I rebuke and chasten" are words for believers only. The word *chasten* is a child-training word (*paideuō*). It is never used of unbelievers in the NT.

The solution stated without any word pictures is simple: "Be zealous and repent." Repentance is not found even once in John's Gospel. That is because it is an evangelistic book and turning from sins is not a condition of everlasting life. However, in the Book of Revelation repentance is found twelve times since both believers (here) and unbelievers (e.g., Rev 9:20-21; 16: 9, 11) need to turn from their sins to escape temporal judgment.

Believers should strive to be people who are known as those who have zeal to do what is right.

What are you zealous for? A nice lawn? A pretty car? A well-kept house? A nice retirement egg?

There is nothing wrong, per se, with any of these things. However, our number-one aim in life should be to please the Lord in all we say and do. We are to seek first the kingdom of God (Matt 6:33).

Repentance is turning from one's sins in order to get right with God. The Laodicean believers needed to turn from their complacency and be zealous to do good works that pleased the Lord.

The point is whatever we are doing that is not pleasing to the Lord, we should admit that it is wrong, stop doing it, and get to work doing what God wants us to do. He has given us the power to do what is right with His indwelling Holy Spirit. The question is, will we listen and obey?

Back to v 18 of Revelation 3. Here the Lord counsels the believers at Laodicea, and all of us as well, regarding what to do to solve their problem.

They are to *buy* some things: refined gold, white garments, and eye salve. Note that these things are not free. The recipient must buy them.

It would be odd if this referred to eternal life because within the Book of Revelation (as well as the Gospel of John and the rest of the NT) eternal life is absolutely free. Revelation 22:17 says, “whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.” Eternal life is free. The gold, white garments, and eye salve are not free. A similar statement is found one chapter earlier, in Rev 21:6, “I will give the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.” See also John 4:10, 13-14 and Eph 2:8-9.

The gold, clothes, and eye salve are clearly not meant to be taken literally. *They represent what prodigal believers need.*

The refined gold represents eternal treasure, eternal rewards, the true spiritual riches the readers lack. The white garments represent looking good spiritually. To be clothed well spiritually, we need the Lord’s approval. See Rev 3:4-5.

The eye salve represents the ability to see spiritual reality clearly. Believers who deny their sin problem do not see well spiritually. We cannot expect to make much progress in understanding the Bible unless we are walking in fellowship with Christ. He only grants insight to those who are seeking Him.

Verse 18 does not state the price the Laodiceans are to pay. That is stated in the following verse, v 19, which we have already seen. To purchase these things, believers must be zealous and repent.

That means that in order to lay up treasure in heaven, slothful believers must be zealous for good deeds and turn from our sins of omission. To be well-clothed spiritually, and to see God’s Word clearly, we must be zealous for good deeds and turn from our sins.

The believer who is not walking with Christ will not be able to interpret God’s Word well because understanding God’s Word is more than mere mechanics. It isn’t simply about doing word studies, grammatical studies, and asking the right questions. There is a spiritual component to exegesis. God only opens His Word to those who are ready to apply it. See John 2:23-25.

The phone is ringing. The alarm is going off. It’s time to wake up and get to work!

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO OPEN THE DOOR? (v 20)

We now turn to one of the most famous, and most misinterpreted and misapplied verses in the entire Bible, Rev 3:20.

Revelation 3:20 is not an evangelistic verse. Many think the Lord Jesus is telling unbelievers that they can have eternal life if they open the door of their lives to Him by inviting Him in.

In the first place, this is foreign to the preceding context. Believers are being addressed, not unbelievers. The issue is works, not faith.

In the second place, as we shall now see, v 20 itself shows that evangelism is not in view. Verse 20 completes the thought by using another word picture. There are famous paintings showing Christ standing at a door knocking. I love the paintings. However, I find they can be misleading.

Four Scenes are present in v 20. Scene one: Christ is at the door knocking. Scene two: An individual is opening the door. Scene three: Christ comes inside the house up to the individual who opened the door. Scene four: Christ and the individual are sitting at a table enjoying a meal together in joyful fellowship.

Clearly this is not a literal door and it is not opened by turning a knob or by inviting the Lord in. It is opened by doing what the Lord is commanding, by being zealous and repenting.

John’s Gospel is clear that faith in Christ, not inviting Him into your heart, not being zealous and repenting, is the sole condition of having everlasting life that can never be lost.

Countless people have been terribly confused, and many of those remain unregenerate in part because of faulty teaching on Rev 3:20.

What is promised is a shared meal together, not eternal life. Dining is a figure of speech which symbolizes fellowship. In the culture of that day, and this is still true today throughout the world, sharing a meal together is one of the highest forms of fellowship and joy.

This is clearly not a salvation verse. The entire context is dealing with works and the need for believers to produce good works.

The point of v 20 is that if we wake up and get to work then the Lord will be pleased with us and we will be in fellowship with Him. If we wish to be in fellowship with Christ, then we must obey Him. As He said to His disciples in the upper room, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

Additionally, other verses show that opening a door is not the method of gaining eternal life. Compare John 1:12; 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; and Eph 2:8-9. Faith is the sole condition of eternal life. Since in this context one opens the door by repenting and being zealous for good works (v 19), this is not a call to faith and it is not evangelism.

Finally, experience shows that this is not an evangelism verse. While we don't base theology on experience, if some interpretation is clearly contradicted by experience, then we should rethink the interpretation.

Early in my Christian life I told a fellow college student that she needed to invite Jesus into her heart so she could be born again. “Really,” she said. “Why is that? I take communion every week and the Lord literally comes into me. Are you saying that because I don't say the words ‘Jesus, come into my life,’ that He hasn't come in yet?” The girl who said that to me was Roman Catholic and I had no good answer for her.

I once had a young man, who I later found out was Ba'hai, who prayed with me to invite Jesus into his heart. When I later found out he did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah or the second member of the Trinity, I asked him why he had invited Jesus into his heart. He said it was because he wanted all the prophets in his life.

There was the missionary kid who invited Jesus in hundreds of times, never knowing if he did it right. He was always looking for a feeling. Then one day finally he was delivered when a preacher showed from the Bible that the condition of eternal life is faith in Christ.

Taking this as an evangelism verse not only garbles the promise of everlasting life, it also removes the power of the passage to wake up believers so that they get to work.

The first part of the wakeup call to the complacent believer is a statement of the problem: your works and attitude are bad. Part two of the call is the solution: be zealous for good works and turn from your many sins of omission.

THE POSSIBLE REWARD (v 21)

The Greek word for overcome is *nikaō*. The noun form is *nikē*. It means *victory* or *winning a victory*.

That's where Nike shoes got their name. They are the shoes of winners.

Well, Jesus wants us to be Nike kind of Christians. He wants us to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil by being zealous for good deeds.

If we are overcomers, then He promises us a wonderful reward. Overcomers will sit with Him on His throne. That is, Nike Christians will rule with Christ forever (cf. Rev 2:26-27, “power over the nations”; Luke 19:16-26, ruling over ten or five or no cities; 2 Tim 2:12, “if we endure, we will reign with Him”).

Note that verse 21 refers to what I call the end of contest reward. There are two types of eternal rewards mentioned in Scripture, instant winners (Matt 6:19-21; Matt 10:42) and end of contest winners (Gal 6:7-9; 2 Tim 2:12). The latter prizes cannot be won until this life ends (via Rapture or death).

Note that even if you haven't been doing well in your service for Christ thus far, you can start now. The Laodiceans were not doing well, yet the Lord holds out the possibility that they might rule with Him if they wake up and get to work now, and continue doing well until He returns.

The same thing is found in 1 Corinthians 9. The Corinthian believers were not spiritual men and women, yet Paul held out the possibility in I Cor 9:24-27 that they still might gain the end of contest reward.

Verse 21 is saying wake up and get to work. Payday is just around the corner.

THE EPILOGUE: LISTEN UP (v 22)

This statement occurs in all seven letters and is a fitting conclusion to all seven. The Lord wants us to listen. The epilogue and the prologue are like bookends. Pay attention. Do what He says.

Believer, are your ears open?

Pleasing God and gaining His approval is not automatic. It takes effort. We have to read His word, fellowship with other Christians, and get to work.

To gain eternal life: believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life. It is as simple as that.

To please the Lord and lay up eternal treasure: do works that are pleasing to the Lord. Endure in your service for Him.

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