

## **“I Stand at the Door and Knock” (Revelation 3:14–22)**

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**Brian Watson**

One of the most painful things that we experience is rejection. When we don't get a job, or lose a job, an employer is telling us, "I don't need you." If we're rejected by a friend, the message is the same: "I don't need you in my life." The most painful rejection that we will experience is being rejected by a spouse. If our husband or wife were to tell us they want a divorce, they are saying, "I don't need you in my life. I'm better off without you."

All of us know rejection on some level, and we know how painful it is. And I'm sure that all of us have rejected some people. We've turned down proposals, invitations, dates, and offers. We've been turned down, and we've turned others down.

But the greatest rejection is not one that we have received. The greatest rejection is one that we all have given at some point in time.

All of us have, at some point in our lives, rejected God. We may not have said, "God, I reject you." But we have acted as if we don't need God. We've acted like we haven't needed God's help, or at least God's presence, in our lives. Human nature tends to reject God and his commandments. That is why Christianity teaches that human nature is fallen. Even after we become Christians, there are times when we might be tempted to ignore God or act as though we don't need his help all the time.

Today, as we continue our study of the book of Revelation, we'll hear Jesus address a church that was proud, a church that put its trust in its city's resources, a church that was, as it strange as it sounds, essentially rejecting Jesus. They were in danger: if they kept rejecting Jesus, Jesus would reject them.

Today, we're going to look at Revelation 3:14–22. Before we read that, I want to share a bit of information about the city that we'll read about. This information will help us understand the passage better. The church that Jesus addresses here was in Laodicea, a city in the Roman province of Asia Minor. The city was known for a few things. It was a wealthy city, known for its banks. It also was known for producing black wool and garments made from that wool. And it was known for a school of medicine that produced some kind of salve or compound that supposedly helped people with certain eye conditions. I'm not sure how well ancient medicine

could address eye problems, but perhaps this medicine helped with conjunctivitis and similar ailments.

The city of Laodicea didn't have its own water supply, or at least a water supply good for drinking. So, aqueducts brought water to the city. The water that the city had was high in calcium carbonate deposits, which apparently could make those who drank it vomit. This city was unlike two surrounding cities. Hierapolis, a city six miles north of Laodicea, was known for its hot springs, which were believed to promote healing. Colossae, a city ten miles to the east, was known for its cold, pure water, good for drinking. But Laodicea had bad water, which wasn't good for anything.

Keep that in mind as we now read Revelation 3:14–22:

<sup>14</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

<sup>15</sup>“‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. <sup>18</sup>I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. <sup>19</sup>Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. <sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. <sup>21</sup>The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”<sup>1</sup>

In each of the seven messages that Jesus gives to these seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, he describes himself. Here, he says that he is “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.” Jesus is faithful to God and he always speaks the truth. That is why he is called faithful, or trustworthy, and true throughout the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:5; 3:7; 19:11; 22:6). “Amen” means “so let it be,” or “truly.” And Jesus is a witness to God. He is the best witness we have to the truth about God. In fact, Jesus describes himself as the truth in John’s Gospel (John 14:6). And the apostle Paul says, “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory” (2 Cor. 1:20).

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<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

So, Jesus is faithful and true. But he's also called "the beginning of God's creation." If you were to take that phrase in isolation, you might think that Jesus is a created being, perhaps the first created being. However, Jesus is the Son of God, and the Son of God is not created. He is eternal and he is as divine as God the Father. The Bible says that God the Father created all things through the Son, and therefore the Son can't be a created being (Heb. 1:2; John 1:1-3). Jesus could mean that he is the beginning of creation in the sense that, as the Son of God, he began creation. Now, the Son of God did add to himself a human nature over two thousand years ago, and certainly his human nature and body were created, but it would be an error to say that the person of Jesus was created.

"The beginning of God's creation" could be something of a reference to Colossians 1. Christians in Laodicea would likely be familiar with the book of Colossians, because Colossae was so close to them and because Laodicea is mentioned in that book. In Colossians 1:15, Paul says that Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation." Again, that may sound like Jesus is created. But then, in the next verse, Paul says that all things were created by him. But firstborn doesn't necessarily mean created. Firstborn is a title that refers to the rights of the oldest son; the oldest son inherits the power of the father.

But perhaps when we hear of God's creation in this passage, Jesus has something more specific in mind. In Colossians 1:18, Paul says that Jesus is "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." And in Revelation 1:5, where Jesus is called "the faithful witness," he is also called "the firstborn of the dead." Jesus was the first human being to be resurrected. He wasn't the first human being to be brought back from the dead. There were some who died and were miraculously brought back to life, only to die again. But after Jesus died on the cross to atone for the sins of his people, he was resurrected: he came back to life in a body that can never die again, a body that is immortal, a body that is glorified. And perhaps what is meant here is that Jesus' resurrected body is the beginning of a new creation, the first installment of a perfect world in which there is no evil, no sin, no decay and corruption, no death. The rest of that new creation will come to earth when Jesus returns to earth from heaven.

So, perhaps Jesus is reminding this church that he is the beginning of God's new creation. After all, in Isaiah 65:16, God twice calls himself the "God of truth," or in the Hebrew, *Elohim amen*. And in the very next verse, Isaiah 65:17, God promises that there will be a new heavens

and a new earth, a new creation. Jesus, the Amen, the God of truth, is the first installment of that new creation, and he promises to bring about a perfect world when he comes again.

I don't normally dig into one verse with so much detail, but it's very important that we understand who Jesus is. If we thought that he was anything less than God, we would be wrong. If we didn't think he actually rose from the dead, we would be wrong. If we thought there was another way to be right with God than to know Jesus and trust in him, we would be wrong. To be wrong here isn't just to get a question on a test wrong. To be wrong here is to reject God.

The question for us is, do we truly know who Jesus is? And if we know exactly who Jesus is, do we live like it? If we understand that Jesus is the Son of God, the world's only Savior, the only human being who is completely faithful and true, the very God of truth himself, and the one who died on the cross to pay for sins and who rose from the grave as the first installment of a new creation, then our lives will change. If we understand who Jesus is, we'll start to understand who we are: by nature, we reject God and his commandments. We are unlike Jesus. We are often faithless and not true. But if we see that Jesus offers salvation from our rebellion against God and the condemnation we deserve, we'll see our need for him. We'll run to him. We'll cling to him.

Jesus then tells this church that he knows their works. They are neither hot nor cold. But he wishes they would be hot or cold. Instead, they are lukewarm. Remember what I said earlier about Laodicea and its neighboring cities. Hierapolis to the north had hot water good for healing. Colossae to the east had pure, cold water, good for drinking. What Jesus is saying here is not that people who are hot are passionate for him, and people who are cold are people who reject him, and people who are lukewarm are somewhat ambivalent toward him. You may have heard that before, and that is wrong. If that were right, Jesus would be saying it's better to be an atheist than what some people call an "apatheist," or an agnostic who doesn't care enough to pursue the truth. What Jesus is really saying is, "I wish you were either like the waters of Hierapolis, hot and good for healing, or the waters of Colossae, cold and good for drinking. But you're neither of those things. You're useless." He's not talking about "lukewarm Christians," in the sense of true Christians who are being somewhat lax in their faith. He's saying, "You're not really Christians at all, even though you're supposedly a church!" And if they were to continue this way, Jesus would spit them out of his mouth. He would reject them, because they are rejecting him.

How do we know these supposed Christians are actually rejecting Jesus? In verse 17, Jesus says that they claim to be rich, as though they needed nothing, when they are actually “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” Laodicea was known for being wealthy, for their eye medicine, and for their clothing. It was a self-reliant city. In the year 60, just a few decades earlier, the city was destroyed by an earthquake. But instead of taking money from Rome to rebuild, as other cities did, the city funded its own rebuilding efforts. They trusted in themselves. And apparently that’s their attitude toward Jesus. They must have thought, “We’re doing well in life. We have everything we need. We’re not really that bad.” But Jesus reveals their true condition. They are wretched sinners, pitiable because they stand condemned. They are poor spiritually, because they don’t have the riches that are in Christ. They are blind because they can’t see the truth, the truth about their own condition and the truth about Jesus. And they are naked: their works are exposed before God’s eyes, and right now there is nothing that covers their sin.

But this condition can change. They can come to Jesus and be made rich. They can come to Jesus and be clothed in white garments, clothing that is pure and unstained by sin, clothing that can cover the nakedness of their sin. They can come to Jesus and see the truth.

To come to Jesus, they need to buy refined gold from him. The idea that they must buy refined gold hints that what the world views as pure gold is full of impurities. The things that we so often value in this life, such as money, fame, entertainment, pleasure, power, status, are tainted by impurities. Only Jesus has the pure treasure, and we must come to him to get it.

But how can we buy this pure gold from him if we are truly poor? Can anyone really buy something from Jesus?

Once again, the book of Revelation calls back to the Old Testament. And, once again, we must turn back to the book of Isaiah to understand what we’re reading here. This is what we read at the beginning of Isaiah 55:

- <sup>1</sup> “Come, everyone who thirsts,  
come to the waters;  
and he who has no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk  
without money and without price.
- <sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,

- and delight yourselves in rich food.
- <sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me;  
hear, that your soul may live.”

This passage in Isaiah bids people to come, buy, and eat. Those who are thirsty should come to the waters. Those who are hungry should come to “eat what is good, . . . rich food.” But those who are thirsting and hungry are without money. How can someone who “has no money, come buy and eat”? The only way that can happen is if someone else gives you money so that you can buy. Imagine that you were in line in Market Basket with a cart full of groceries, not knowing if you had enough money to pay for that food, and the person ahead of you said, “I’ll pay for your groceries.” If you didn’t have enough money, and that person paid for your groceries, then you could buy. You could buy without price to you, but it would still cost someone else something. There’s no such thing as a free lunch. Someone has to pay for it. And the same is true of this pure, refined gold that Jesus tells the Laodiceans to buy. They can buy it without price, but it will cost someone something.

In fact, it cost Jesus everything. Jesus can offer treasure to us because he has purchased it for us. He bought treasure for us with this perfect, righteous life, his atoning death on the cross, and his resurrection. And it cost Jesus to do these things. As the eternal Son of God, he only knew glory in heaven, but he left heaven to become a human being. He subjected himself to physically uncomfortable things that we experience, like pain, hunger, thirst, and fatigue. Some people mocked him, despised him, rejected him, and betrayed him. In the end, some people even killed him. Yet this was ultimately God’s plan, to rescue wretched, pitiable, poor, naked, and blind sinners from condemnation. Though we lack righteousness on our own, Jesus lived the perfectly righteous life that we should live, and if we trust him, his righteousness is credited to us. Because of our sin against God, our Creator and Sustainer, the one who owns the world and everything in it, we should pay the price. We should be condemned. But Jesus was condemned in the place of all who put their faith in him. He paid that price for us, by enduring the wrath of God. And he also rose from the grave, for our justification, demonstrating that he paid the price for our sin in full, that he triumphed over sin and death, and that God will one day bring about a new creation, one of pure gold, not tainted by impurities.

Everything costs something, and it costs Jesus dearly to pay for our sins. We were awash in debt, and Jesus paid all our debt and gave us money to spare. We were naked, all our sins

exposed, and Jesus covered us up. We were blind to the truth, but Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, to open up our eyes to see.

If we humbly go to Jesus, we can be truly rich, clothed in pure garments, and we can see the truth.

But if we go to Jesus, he will continue to mold us and shape us. He'll correct us. He'll discipline us. He does this because he loves us. Jesus loves us too much to leave us the way we are. We see this in verse 19: "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent." Jesus delivers these harsh words to the church in Laodicea because he loves them. Because we're sinners, we need to change. God does not need to change, and he doesn't. Jesus doesn't need to change. But we do. And God sometimes uses hard words to correct us. He brings us into difficult situations to humble us, to bring us to our knees, and he does this because he loves us.

If we come to Jesus, he will teach us and discipline us. Discipline is hard, but it's necessary. Discipline forces us to change for the good. If Jesus didn't love us, he would let us go our own way, without correcting us. But because Jesus loves us, he tells us to repent, to turn away from the idols we've been chasing, to stop trusting in ourselves, and to turn to him. If we trust Jesus, we will repent. If we don't, we'll shrug our shoulders or we'll simply reject the true Jesus, the Jesus of history and of the Bible, and we'll create a Jesus made in our own image.

That's what many people do. I have heard people say that Jesus or God won't judge people. But God is a judge. He is called the "Judge of all the earth" in the Bible (Gen. 18:25). And Jesus will judge all the earth. We'll see that later in Revelation (Rev. 20:11–15). God judges because he loves. He deems that some things are evil and destructive. And there will be a day when God removes all evil from his creation. If we truly love others, we don't want them to have something destructive in their lives. If we had the power, we would remove the evil from their lives. God does have the power to do that, and he will do it because he loves.

But before that great day of judgment, God disciplines us. He corrects us through his word, the Bible. He brings us into trials, to refine us. And he does this because he loves us. The author of Hebrews quotes a Proverb in Hebrews 12. Proverbs 3:11–12 says that we shouldn't despise God's discipline, because God disciplines those whom he loves. Then, the author of Hebrews says this:

<sup>7</sup> It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? <sup>8</sup> If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. <sup>9</sup> Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? <sup>10</sup> For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. <sup>11</sup> For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it (Heb. 12:7–11).

If God didn't discipline us, it would be because he didn't love us. We wouldn't truly be God's children. But because God loves his children, he disciplines them, just as loving parents discipline their children. Discipline isn't pleasant in the moment. It can even be painful. But it's for our good. It trains us for righteousness.

If we understand who Jesus truly is, and what our natural condition is, we will accept Jesus' discipline. We will open the door of our lives to Jesus and accept all that comes with him. And that's why Jesus tells this church that he is standing at the door and knocking. This church wasn't a real church, because they had effectively barred the door to Jesus. They shut him out. I'm sure that they mentioned Jesus' name when they met. I'm sure that they prayed in Jesus' name. But their self-reliance showed that they weren't relying on Jesus. They were actually rejecting Jesus. If they were ready to repent, they would open the door to Jesus and let him in. If they did that, Jesus would eat with them. He would have an intimate relationship with him. Throughout the Bible, the image of eating with God is a picture of sharing life with him. But it's more than just that: God gives us true food that will sustain us forever. But we so often labor for that which isn't bread from heaven, the cheap food of this world that doesn't satisfy us. If we would open the door to Jesus, we could experience something greater. And those who trust in Jesus will experience the finest of foods. Eternity in the new creation is often described as a feast. We will have real pleasures there: physical pleasures and also spiritual pleasures. We will experience joy and satisfaction that we don't experience now. All our pains, all our anxiety and depression and loneliness, will be removed. And in their place will be joy, love, and peace.

Jesus promises all of that to those who accept him, who invite him into their lives. But Jesus isn't some weakling, waiting at the door passively. Just as we can only buy from Jesus if he pays the price, we can only open the door to Jesus if God works in our hearts so that we want to open that door. If you have been rejecting the true Jesus, if you have despised his discipline, and you are starting to realize it, then God is at work in you. If that is the case, open the door to



Jesus. Let him into your life. If he comes, he will change all that is in your house. He doesn't come as a guest. He comes as someone who owns the house and who will do some remodeling.

This reminds me of a passage in *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Toward the end of this book, Lewis talks about what it means to be a Christian and he too uses the metaphor of a building. This is what he writes:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and to live in it Himself.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus promises that those who accept him, those who trust in him in the face of all the challenges of this life, will conquer. And those who conquer will sit with him on the throne. In the Bible, we're told that Jesus reigns now in heaven, above all powers, but he will reign in a fuller, or least more obvious way, when he returns to earth. Similarly, in the Bible, we're told that Christians are already reigning with Jesus, but will reign to a greater extent in eternity. We are already seated in the heavenly places with Jesus (Eph. 2:6). Christians are reigning now (Rev. 20:4). It's clear that the world doesn't recognize that. But in eternity, it will be clear. We will reign with Jesus. We may look poor, wretched, and pitiable to the world right now, but that doesn't matter. What matters is how God sees us. And if we're faithful to God, he will reward us richly. We will eat with Jesus and we will reign with him.

So, what should we do right now? Right now, you may be rejecting Jesus. You may say you believe in Jesus, but is the Jesus you trust in the Jesus of the Bible? If you are shaving off the sharp edges of Jesus, the parts of Jesus that correct you and rub you in what you think is the wrong way, you're rejecting the true Jesus. If you don't accept Jesus' teachings as true and authoritative, you've rejected Jesus. To reject the true Jesus is to reject the true God. If we are rejecting the true Jesus, we're like the church in Laodicea: we're good for nothing. And if we end our lives rejecting the true Jesus, he will spit us out of his mouth. He will reject us forever.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr. New York: Touchstone, 1996), 176.

If you don't identify as a Christian, I urge you to trust in Jesus. No one else can pay the price of your redemption. Yes, coming to Jesus means changing. But we all need to change. Change is the only way we can have our fallen nature restored and healed.

If you do identify as a Christian, do you let Jesus into every area of your life? Do you accept Jesus' discipline and correction? Are you repenting? If not, perhaps you're like that church in Laodicea. You're trusting in yourself. You don't think you really need him. You also must repent.

And we as a church must continue to let Jesus dwell in our midst. We must let Jesus correct us. We must let him discipline us. I think that most churches bar Jesus from coming into their midst fully. Some reject Jesus' teachings about sin and salvation. Some reject Jesus' teachings about sex and marriage. Some reject Jesus' teachings about love for neighbor and even love for our enemies. Some reject Jesus' teachings about caring for the poor and avoiding the idols of money and power. There are many ways to reject Jesus, and we must make sure that we are faithful to him.

So, let us continue to trust in Jesus. Let us repent, always turning away from sin and self-sufficiency. Let us open the door to Jesus and eat with him. And let us look forward to that great day when we will reign with him forever.