

Race and Poverty: Five-Session Study Guide

Lesson 4

Confession and Repentance: You've Got Mail!

Focal Passage: Revelation 3:14–19

Background Passages: Revelation 1:4; Colossians 4:13–16; Matthew 6:19–21, 24; 25:31–46; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Luke 4:18

Session Synopsis: A call to Intentionality of Confession and Repentance

We have deceived ourselves into thinking that we have no need of God. More often than not, we have also become lukewarm (indifferent) in our dealings with one another, leading us to become grossly insensitive and negligent to the plight of neighbor and foe alike. The time has come to repent of our selfishness and move into right relationship with God, self, and others.

Session Objectives

Participants will:

- acknowledge that incomplete faith is no faith, that allowing the relationship with God to affect some aspects of who we are and how we live, but not others, is sin
- identify ways in which we compartmentalize the relationship with God, choosing to embrace worldly values in some areas of our lives, and choosing to trust in ourselves (rugged individualism, personal success) in other areas, rather than allow God's values to define who we are
- identify specific areas or personal practices in which we are "lukewarm" and specific, concrete acts of repentance

Preparation

- Engage in personal reflection with Revelation 3:14-19 in order to own its message, to be challenged by its call, and to be prepared to fully engage others in this deep and potentially life-changing aha moment.
- Gather local and national news clippings and internet postings on the effects that natural disasters bring to communities, and in particular on the effects hurricane Katrina has had in the lives of those closely affected by its devastation. Post these on the walls where the session is to be held.
- Prepare newsprint for Gathering by dividing one sheet into two sections and labeling one section, *How We Feel/Felt* and the other, *How We'll Respond*.
- Makes copies and gather materials as noted in Materials Needed.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- copies of Participants' Pieces for each person
- news clippings and internet postings on natural disasters and hurricane Katrina
- newsprint with sections labeled *How We Feel/Felt* and *How We'll Respond*
- marker
- pencils

Gathering

As the group gathers, ask each participant to recall a time when they directly or indirectly experienced a natural disaster. Have participants pair up and briefly share the experiences they recall including what happened, who was there, who helped out, and what ramifications are still left.

After a few minutes of sharing, reconvene the group to talk about what has impacted them most about what they know of hurricane Katrina: the loss of life, the loss of property, the lack of immediate help, the condition that people were living in that did not allow them to evacuate safely, the negligence on the part of government, etc. Ask how did they feel? Were the feelings the same or different from their own “disaster” experience?

Jot down the feelings expressed on the newsprint, under the *How We Feel/Felt* section. (Leave the “how we’ll respond” section blank for use at the end of the session.)

Missional Moment

Review together Participants’ Piece #1, “The Hurricane and Poverty.”

The Missional Mandate

Review together Participants’ Piece #2, “Bible Background: Revelation 3:14–19.”

Call the group to embrace the message of Revelation 3:14–19 and set the stage for Missional Merger by sharing the following:

Today, once again, the church of Jesus Christ is given a new opportunity to stop living a lukewarm faith, straddling the fence between doing something on behalf of the poor out of charity, pity, and on occasion, and at the same time being content to store up treasure for ourselves here on earth (Matt. 6:19–21). The call to each individual is to a radical shift in day-to-day life, evaluating spending habits and daily stewardship issues of time, money, and energy. For the Christian church the opportunity is given to do missions according to God’s heart and mandates impacting the community and the place it is in by being in solidarity with those who live life on the margins of society. There is a place at the table for everyone in the kingdom of God. It is a call for the church to seek ways to impact oppressive systems and to seek diligently the equitable distribution of wealth, food, shelter, and educational opportunities for all. The following question posed to us as we read the letter to Laodicea should propel us to confess, repent, and change our lukewarm faith: *How do well-meaning Christians read the Bible in order to reconcile a faith in Christ with their continuous pursuit of power and privilege? In other words, how is the Bible read to justify living amid wealth and privilege while others lack basic rights and necessities?*¹

We too have received this letter. We have opened, read, and understood its message to us amidst the tragedy of hurricane Katrina and the shining light it has brought to the reality

of extreme poverty and suffering here in the United States. What will we as disciples of Jesus Christ need to do individually and collectively to be on fire for the cause of Jesus and to be in solidarity now and in the long run with those who are waiting to experience God's love concretely demonstrated through the meeting of daily physical, social, and spiritual needs?

Missional Merger

For participants to get to the aha moment of the text found in Revelation 3:14–19, they must have the opportunity to read the text, ask questions of the text, interpret the text in the context of the Bible, and make relevant applications to today. Therefore the formation of small groups for reflection and study is suggested. Form small groups with no more than three or four persons in each group and give groups fifteen to twenty minutes to meet together and discuss the questions in Participants Piece #3, "Engage the Text." When groups have completed their task, have them report to the larger group by sharing their response to the last question. On the newsprint used to gather folks at the beginning of this session, write their responses in the *How We'll Respond* section.

Commissioning

Draw the session to a close and invite participants to prayer as follows:

In today's session we were given the opportunity to read someone's letter, a letter sent long ago to a people long ago. And yet it is a letter written for our specific space, time, and context. Let us hold one another accountable for our decisions today. Let us respond to the timeless message of Revelation 3:14–19 by reciting the "Lord's Prayer litany" as printed on your handouts.

1. Miguel A. de la Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 44.

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Participants' Pieces

1. The Hurricane and Poverty

- Hurricane Katrina has been called the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States. Its catastrophic nature and devastation have been widely reported by all forms of media. It has not only directly affected the states in the Gulf Coast, but its ripple effects have been felt by all. Statistics, which change by the day, cannot keep up as the exploration and evaluation of its devastation will continue to shock even more in the days, months, and years to come. The losses are too many to quantify: too many are the dead (as of this writing more than one thousand); huge is the loss of property; countless the loss of jobs; nameless the loss of family ties, friendships, and dreams. The physical and emotional trauma will continue to surface in years to come. What has also surfaced in a powerful way is the level of poverty prevalent in the United States.

- Before hurricane Katrina, many of those affected were already among the poorest of America's poor. In the hardest hit counties, some 305,000 people not only lived in poverty, but their families' income fell below 50 percent of the poverty line—about \$7,500 for a family of three. Now many live in strange towns with only a few dollars in their pockets. They've become a new class of poor, one that makes the old class look well off by comparison. They have not only lost their jobs and their homes; they're also isolated from family and friends, putting them at great risk for depression and substance abuse. [Article published on 23 September 2005 in Boston.com.]

- The level of poverty continues to grow, and children are the most affected: twelve million children in families with incomes below the federal poverty level, and five million children live in families whose incomes are less than half the federal poverty level! [National Center for Children in Poverty, www.nccp.org.]

- Affected by this disaster have been thousands of legal as well as undocumented immigrants who have come to this country from many foreign lands in search of a better tomorrow for their families. Promises by the government to help out and not to deport have been shattered by some INS officials who have taken advantage of the pain and misery of these evacuees and promptly incarcerated them. Many are now awaiting deportation.

2. Bible Background: Revelation 3:14-19

Revelation 3:14–19 is one of the seven letters addressed to the seven churches in the province of Asia (Rev. 1:4). All seven letters are written with more or less the same order. Each comes directly from Jesus in all his glory and splendor. A specific message to each church follows, usually with some kind of praise or recognition with a warning or reproach given to each church. A promise for redemption concludes the letters, if they will do what is needed in confession and repentance. This is very much in keeping with the overall themes found in the book of Revelation: judgment, redemption, and the

kingdom of God. It is interesting to note that the church in Laodicea does not receive praise and the church in Ephesus does not receive a reproach.

Laodicea is known to be a proud and affluent city near Colossae (Col. 4:13–16) and as such is known for its banks, recommended by even Cicero for exchanging money; its linen and wool industry; its medical school and famed medicines, notable among them an ointment used to treat eye ailments. According to the text, the church situated amidst this wealth has an arrogance and attitude of self-sufficiency (Rev. 3:17), which has produced a middle of the road lukewarm religion ebbing between depending on their efforts to maintain a status and quality of life, to following the teaching of Jesus. “The Laodiceans do not reject the gospel of Christ, nor do they affirm it with joy. They maintain it without conviction, without enthusiasm, without reflection on its implication for life.” [G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Revelation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1980), 104.] They are content to live life as if their beliefs do not impact their daily life.

The charge leveled at the church in Laodicea is precisely the nature of their lukewarm faith. They are neither hot, which would imply totally living day-to-day life based on the radical teaching of Jesus; nor are they cold, meaning that they are accepting a lifestyle of comfort and ease at the expense of others who are suffering from the lack of equal distribution of wealth. They are lukewarm, neither here nor there. The letter addresses this particular situation. The word that comes from the Lord is crystal clear: being lukewarm is totally, 100 percent unacceptable! “I am about to spit you out of my mouth” says the Lord, if you do not decide once and for all whose side you are going to be on—no middle-of-the-road religion. Either you believe in totality or you don’t. The letter clearly implies that a decision must be made whether to follow Jesus in his entire message of reconciliation and radical living or reject his teachings altogether.

Much harm is done by those professing to be religious and yet live day to day life as they are not. Matthew 6:24 speaks to this same sin: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth.” Elsewhere in the Bible these middle-of-the-road Christians are called hypocrites!

The tragic and sad state of affairs for the Laodiceans is that while they think they are well off, they are actually quite the opposite. They are in fact wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17). The message again speaks to the false values and assets which inform their “Christian” walk: although they have money, yet they are poor; although they have great medicine for the eyes, yet they are blind; although they have great textiles and clothing, yet they are naked.

The hope for the Laodiceans is that all is not lost, for in Jesus there is always hope for a brand-new start. The message from the Amen (Jesus himself—2 Cor. 1:20) given in verse 18 provides a redemptive option for their sinful and middle-of-the-road ways. The counsel here is to make a complete turnaround and once and for all discover and claim for their lives the source of their real wealth, the kind of wealth that only comes from God and from living life by kingdom of God ethics and principles. Wealth in this sense is not material well-being, money in the bank, the finest clothes, or even the best of health medicine can give. The wealth spoken here is of gold refined by fire, eternal treasure and

nonperishable; white robes to clothe from nakedness—salvation, forgiveness of sins and new life, nothing of which to be ashamed; salve to clear blurry vision to see clearly the reality of living life according to the passion and compassion of Jesus—his preferential option for the poor, for the suffering, for the outcast, for the most vulnerable (Luke 4:18; Matt. 25:31–46). It is a call to move from straddling the fence, from living in the center of complacency and to make a radical shift to a discipleship in Jesus that would demand a change in the distribution of their wealth, of their time, of their energy, and of their self-centeredness. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot continue to live life in solidarity with oppressive powers and those who systematize and keep wealth while at the same time pretending to be in solidarity with those who are poor, vulnerable, weak, and who are the recipients of the scraps of living life on the margins.

“Here is the choice Jesus gives us: we can pursue self-centeredness and the power and privilege it provides or we can choose to follow God, but we can’t do both. Nonetheless, those at the center, accustomed to its privilege want to do both. And they believe that it is possible to serve God and to protect their power and privilege. This pursuit of power and wealth, masked under a façade of Christianity, inevitably leads to injustice, here defined as the undue privilege obtained by the powerful and the lack of rights existing for the powerless.” [Miguel A. de la Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 44.]

Grace and a new opportunity for confession and for repentance for the sinfulness of living life trying to please two masters come to the church in Laodicea. Out of God’s glorious, bountiful, merciful love comes an opportunity to repent in earnest and in serious, intentional fashion to transform their erring ways. In God it is never too late for a brand-new start. The decision, however, has to be made out of a total conviction that Jesus’ lordship will reign and that his teachings will be accepted as mandates, nonnegotiable and optional, for living life in solidarity with others and in faithfulness to God. A decision has to be made that lukewarm faith will no longer be acceptable. The time to choose is gracefully extended by way of a letter that contains no words of praise and yet is full of love and grace.

3. Engage the Text

Read together Revelation 3:4-19 and discuss the questions below. Refer to Bible background above as necessary.

1. According to Revelation 3:14, who is the Amen (also see 2 Corinthians 1:20)?
2. In your opinion, what is the significance that the Amen is “the origin of God’s creation”? (The New International Version [NIV] uses the term “the ruler of God’s creation.”)
3. According to verse 15, what is the charge made against the church?
4. The city of Laodicea was known in Asia for its rich monetary banks, its fine linen, and its medicines, in particular a salve for eye problems. Laodiceans depended on these

material goods for their contentment and well-being. Connect this fact to the counsel given to them in verses 17–18.

5. Why do think that God’s words are so hard hitting as they relate to the church’s being lukewarm? (“I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”)

6. Why is the church called to be earnest and to repent from their middle-of-the-road—neither hot nor cold—faith?

7. In light of Jesus’ indignation at the dependence of his followers on material wealth and self-centeredness, what is the message for you and your church today?

8. What should our individual and collective response be to the reality of the shameful poverty and lack of basic needs that hurricane Katrina uncovered?

9. How can we concretely respond to the people affected by Katrina and who continue to be in need? (Discuss and record short- and long-term responses that will be shared with the larger group.)

4. The Lord’s Prayer: a litany

Leader: Loving God in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Members: Help us to always remember that you are Holy and Creator of all. Nothing is ours to keep. All adoration is for you alone.

Leader: Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Members: Remind us again and again that your kingdom came to us in Jesus and that your perfect will is for all to share in the riches, privileges, and mandates of the kingdom on earth as in heaven.

Leader: Give us this day our daily bread.

Members: And give us compassion to share daily life-giving bread to those who are suffer from physical and spiritual hunger.

Leader: Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Members: We confess and repent from our sin of self-centeredness, where individualism and the accumulation of material wealth has become the norm at the expense of those who go without and have need. Forgive our lukewarm walk and give us a brand-new start.

Leader: And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Members: Deliver us from the temptation of making luxury into need and from allowing earthly systems to lull us into ineffective faith and content living through mere acts of self-gratifying charity.

Leader: For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

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