

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

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“How Are We Doing?”

[Revelation 3:14-22](#)

Gary had the perfect life. That is the way he described it. He was a proud graduate of Texas A&M University. He had a great job with one of the fastest growing and most profitable companies in the world. He was married to, and these are his words, a beautiful, long legged blond who was the best wife anyone could have. He had three beautiful and healthy daughters. He had a great retirement composed of company stock which would allow him to retire early. Every day he would get up and go to work in the building on the cover of your bulletin, being grateful for all that he had. Then one day at work a rumor began to spread. The rumor was that the company for which they worked was not as solvent as they had been led to believe. They all flocked to their computer screens to hear the CEO declare that there was nothing to the rumors. A few days later however the rumors proved to be true. The value of the company and its stock were plummeting like a skydiver without a chute. What was worse was that the company locked out my friend and his coworkers from selling their company stock. Within days their stock was worthless, the company was bankrupt and Gary was out of a job. The Emperor had no clothes and Enron had cooked the books.

Can you see the picture? Can you see the picture of a company that from the outside appeared to be solid, yet upon closer inspection was nothing more than a shell with few if any real assets? If so then you have the picture that Jesus is painting of the church in Laodicea. By all accounts this church was successful. Their claim was that they were rich, prosperous and self-sufficient...yet Jesus tells them that they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. Such a description must have come as much as a shock to them as it did to Gary and his colleagues at Enron. It must have come as a shock because by all accounts they were a blessed church. They were a blessed church because they had the money to afford all of the staff and program they desired. They were a blessed church because their members prospered in business and in society. They were a blessed church because they did not need to depend on anyone else...they could pay their own bills. Chances are there are lots of churches around the world who would love to be this blessed. So the question is what was so wrong?

The answer is that there was one thing missing...and that one thing was Jesus. The image that is offered by Jesus in this letter is vivid and dramatic. Imagine for a moment a door. On one side of the door is the church. People are meeting and reading scripture and doing churchy kind of stuff. Suddenly there is a knock at the door. People look around wondering who is missing. Someone goes to window, peers out and sees this man knocking to get in. Who is it someone asks. Just Jesus, comes the reply. Which leads us to the worlds first theological knock, knock joke. Knock, Knock. Who's there? Jesus. Jesus who? Exactly the point of the letter. This church for all of its purported blessedness was in fact an empty shell. It was an empty shell

because Christ was not present with them. What had happened was that they had come to believe that they were, because of their wealth and influence, sufficient unto themselves and had no need to invite Jesus into their midst. While talking about Jesus might be fine...actually listening to him and following him was not necessary. They had everything that they needed.

The church in Laodicea had become what people often refer to as a Country Club Church. They had become an organization that met more for social purposes than it did for encountering the living God through the presence of Jesus Christ. They were simply a group of people who liked to meet together, talk about religious ideas and then go on about their lives as if what they had just discussed could be left in the building. The thought that Jesus was calling them to be a community that was to work with him in the releasing, renewing and restoring of God's world was not even on their radar. Jesus, as one can imagine, had words for them. He reminded them that because he is not with them they are in fact useless. This is the image that is conveyed by their being neither hot nor cold. Like the water that flowed into Laodicea, which no one wanted to drink (because it was lukewarm and mineral filled) and so was useless...they too were of no use to God because the power of Christ was not empowering them to mission and ministry. In order to be of some use they needed everything that Jesus had to offer.

It has been said that if there were any of the seven letters in Revelation that the churches in North America needed to hear on a regular basis, it was this very one. We need to hear this one because churches in America, because of our affluence, are constantly faced with the choice of what kind of a church do we want to be. Do we want to be a Country Club church or a mission church? While we may not feel like we are a wealthy church...in comparison to the rest of the world we are. And so our choice is do we leave Jesus standing on the outside, knocking to get in or do we keep the door open welcoming everyone in and following Jesus out of it and into the world? In some ways this may appear to be an easy choice. Sure we are supposed to keep the door open. But churches like every other organization, over time, can lose sight of their call to be a church alive. It becomes easy to devolve into a Country Club church without even realizing that the change has taken place.

So the question for us this morning is what kind of church are we? Having been with you know for one day shy of a year, I have a response to that question. I believe we are a mission church with some occasional Country Club tendencies. What I mean by this is that we are outwardly focused. We are focused on making a difference for Jesus Christ in this world. All you have to do is look at the missions and ministries with which we are involved and you see changed lives and communities because of the work we do together. At the same time there are moments when we can become so comfortable with who we are and how much we like each other (which is a good thing) that we may not be aware of all that Christ is calling us to be and to do. It becomes so easy to be complacent when we are comfortable in our own church skin. That however is just my take...and not necessarily yours. So here is my question for you. How do you think we are doing? I am not asking how am I doing? Or how is the staff doing? I am asking how are we, as the body of Christ that meets at First Presbyterian Church doing?

In order to get your response I have enclosed in your bulletin a report card I want you to fill out. On one side is a report on how we are doing in terms of the issues raised by Jesus with

the seven churches in Revelation. On the other side is how we are doing in terms of our Core Values which we claim are to drive who we are and how we live. What I am asking each of you to do...whether you have been here fifty years or this is your first visit with us...is to grade us as best you can. And not only grade us but give us comments, critiques and suggestions. This is a self analysis, which I know is hard. In school I always disliked a teacher saying, grade your own project. But that is what I am asking us to do. The results will be published and made available and will go to the elders at their summer retreat. It is our way of gathering input from all of you. So you can fill them out now, or later. All I ask is that over the next week or so you take the time to complete the report card and return it...because in so doing we will remind ourselves of who Christ wants us to be and how well we are becoming that kind of a missional church.