

Lukewarmness in the Pulpit

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"I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth." Revelation 3:15-16

Yet once more, notice that, *wherever there is lukewarmness in religious matters, it is out of place*. There is no spot, near to the throne of God, where lukewarmness could stand in a seemly position. *Take the pulpit, for instance*. Ah, my brethren, of all spots in the world, if lukewarmness cometh here, then is the preacher indeed undone! He should be, of all men, the most in earnest who undertakes the charge of souls, for he has that solemn charge ringing in his ears: "I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand." They who have to deal with hardhearted sinners – they who have to preach unpalatable truths – surely they should not make men's hearts harder, and the truth more unpalatable, by uttering it in a half-hearted manner. It will go hard with the man who has exercised his ministry with indifference. "If," said one of old, "there be a man who finds the ministry an easy place, he will find it a hard matter, at the last, to give in his account before God." If, my brethren, there should be any professed ministers of Christ, who never know what it is to travail in birth for souls; if there be men who take up the ministry merely as a profession and exercise it as they might do in any secular calling if they preach merely as a matter of routine or because they consider it is a pleasant occupation; it would have been better for them if they had never been born. Far better would it have been for them to have broken stones by the wayside than to have been preaching the gospel and leaving their hearts out of their sermon; yea, I know not whether it would not have been better to have been a devil in hell than to have been a minister in the pulpit without his heart in his work.

Baxter's "Reformed Pastor" stirs my very soul whenever I read its glowing periods – those fiery thunderbolts which he hurls at the heads of idle shepherds and lazy minister I have read nearly the whole book through to those who are studying for the ministry in connection with this church, and often have I seen the tears start from their eyes while listening to the burning language of that fervent preacher and writer. Every time I have read a chapter in that book, I have felt that, the next Sabbath, I could preach – I must preach – with greater earnestness after reading the solemn words of that mightiest of ministers, Richard Baxter. Ah, beloved, we need to have more of that earnestness in the pulpit! What though my young brethren should study less and be more earnest? Rather let them study as much as ever they can; but, oh! if the Holy Spirit will but shed his sacred fire upon the dry fuel of their studies, how much more will be accomplished for the kingdom of Christ than is done now! So, you see, dear friends, that lukewarmness is out of place in the pulpit.

So it is, my brethren and sisters, in the Sunday school, with the tract-distributor, and even with the private Christian, the humble attendant upon the means of grace. Everywhere, lukewarmness in religion is to be loathed and abandoned, for it is a gross and glaring inconsistency. I would not have you go, with a lukewarm heart, even to distribute tracts. I would not have you dare to visit the sick unless your heart is filled with love to Christ. Either do such work well or do not do it at all. Either put your heart into the work or let someone else do it. We have had too many men of straw filling up our ranks; we have had too many automatons going forth to fight our battles. We have counted our legions, and said, "A brave host they will be;" but if our army is sifted, if our ranks are thinned, we shall probably find that fewer true soldiers of the cross will accomplish more if they are not impeded in their onward march by the mixed multitude of those who pretend to join the army of the living God.

I hope that lukewarm professors will find themselves thoroughly out of place amongst us; I do not think they could long be happy here. There are so many brethren here with a red-hot spirit that they would soon get burned, and they would say "This is not the spot for us." If you, lukewarm professors, come amongst us, you will be asked to do fifty things, and you will be teased till you do them, for the good people here will not be content unless you do all that you can, and they will probably want you to do two or three times more than you can. I am sure that, in all places where God has sent warm-hearted men to preach the gospel, you will find yourselves extremely uncomfortable if you want to be lukewarm. I certainly could tell you of some chapels where you could take your seat, and where you would be greatly needed for the support of the ministry. The minister would never wake you; I daresay, if you paid an extra half-crown a quarter, he would let you sleep on as long as you liked. If you did not join the church, nobody would ever think of asking you whether you were a member or not. In our fashionable churches, of course, people do not speak to one another; that would be quite beneath their assumed dignity. No man would dare, in such a place as that, to turn to his neighbor, and say, "Are you a child of God?" Well, if you mean to be lukewarm, go to one of those places; but do not stay here, lest we should worry you by our importunities. I question whether anybody would come here, for a few Sundays, without some brother walking up to him, and asking him whether he was a follower of Christ, or not; and the question would be repeated, by one or another, until he came to some decision concerning his soul.

Let me remind you that you have to do with solemn realities. You have to do with death, with eternity, with heaven, with hell, with Christ, with Satan, with souls that must live forever; can you deal with these things in a cold spirit? If you can deal thus with them successfully, it will be one of the greatest marvels in the world, for these things demand the whole man. If but to praise God requires that we call up all the powers of our soul, how much more is needed to serve God, and to serve him, not in the hewing of wood and the drawing of water, but in the winning of souls, in preaching his gospel, in propagating his cause, and extending his kingdom. Here, my brethren, are stern and solemn things for us to deal with, and they must not be touched by any but those who come warm-heartedly to deal with them.

And remember, further, that there have been times, with you, when these things did seem worthy of a warm heart. Perhaps you recollect when a child out of your Sunday-school class died, and then you thought, "Oh, that I had taught that child more earnestly, and prayed over it with all my heart!" Possibly, when your own child died, you cried, "O Absalom, my son, my son!" and the thought wounded you to the quick, that you had not taught that child as you might have done, and that you had not wrestled with God in prayer for that child's soul as you ought to have done. Have not I also had to think like this when I have buried some of your kinsfolk or acquaintances? As I have looked down into the grave of some unconverted hearer, the tears have streamed from my eyes; and, afterwards, I have awoke at night with some solemn and terrible dream embodying this black thought, "Have I been faithful to that soul? Have I dealt with that spirit, now departed, as I would deal with it if I had another opportunity of preaching to it?" Sometimes, I feel that I can even say, with the apostle Paul, "I take you to record this day that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." But there are other seasons of awful questioning when I tremble lest, out of so numerous a flock, the loss of even one should be attributed to the shepherd's neglect.

Let me remind you, also, that the day is coming when you will think these things worthy of your whole heart, when you and I shall be stretched upon our dying beds; I think we shall have to regret, above everything else, our coldness of heart. Among the many sins, which we must then confess, perhaps this will lie the heaviest upon our heart and conscience, "I did not live as I ought to have done; I was not as earnest in my Lord's cause as I should have been." Then will our cold sermons, like sheeted ghosts, march before our eyes in dread array. Then will our neglected days start up and to look right into our hearts and make our very blood curdle in our veins. Then will our Sunday-school classes appear again before us; and those who taught us to teach others will come and reprove us for having despised their training and not having profited by that holy instruction which we received when we were set apart for God's cause and were first trained to serve in his great army. We may reckon these things of small importance now; but when we lie on the borders of eternity, we shall think them worth living for, and worth dying a thousand deaths for. If you have lived lukewarmly, the things of God will then, even though you be a child of his, darken your dying hour, and weigh down your spirit with a fearful load of sad reflections.

Ay, and there will come a time when the things of God will seem yet more real than even on our dying bed; that will be when we stand at the bar of God. Am I prepared to stand there with a ministry half discharged? What shall I do if I have to give account before God for sermons preached without my heart being put into them? How shall I appear before my Maker if I have ever kept back anything which I thought might have been useful to you, if I have shunned to rebuke any of you when I ought to have done so, if I have not warned you faithfully, and loved you tenderly, even as my own soul, and sought to woo you to the Savior? How can I give in my account, as a steward of the Lord, if I have only served him half-heartedly? O God, grant, I beseech thee that, notwithstanding a thousand infirmities, thy servant may ever be free from that great sin of being lukewarm in thy cause!

I am fearful, full often, in addressing the same congregation, Sabbath after Sabbath, and week after week, now by the space of seven years, lest my voice should grow stale to you; and I can truthfully say that, I would rather cease to preach at all than preach to people to whom my voice had become so familiar that it was only like the ringing of an old bell to which they gave no heed. No, there must be feeling in the congregation as well as earnestness in the preacher; otherwise, let me resign my commission. I pray God, if I am spared to minister to you, year after year, and you are spared to sit in the pew to hear the Word, that there may be earnestness in you, and earnestness in me that we may never come down to the dead level of some of the churches of which I spoke a little while ago – as you may think, in a spirit of censure; but as God knows, in a spirit of loving faithfulness – old churches that have come to be like pools without outlets, covered over with the sickly duckweed of respectability. *Stagnation in a church is the devil's delight.* I do not think he cares how many Baptist chapels you build nor how many churches you open, if you have only lukewarm preachers and people in them. He cares not for your armies if your soldiers will but sleep; nor for your guns if they are not loaded. God give us grace to make our religion all, that we may put our whole heart into it, and live it out, and then be prepared to die for it, if need be, and God so please, that we may live to enjoy the results of it in glory everlasting!