

*Choices,
Chain Reactions
& the Way Out of
Lukewarmness*

NEVER SETTLE



GREG HOLDER

Greg brings a convicting message that beckons our attention in these times. If we are not diligent to press into greater measures of faith, we will be tempted toward complacency and half-hearted efforts. May these pages spark a fire that reminds us of the significance each day offers. *Never Settle* is a resounding call to embrace the wholehearted passion of the Christian life.

REBEKAH LYONS, bestselling author of *Rhythms of Renewal* and *You Are Free*

Greg Holder is a gifted teacher with a profound Christian faith who has much to offer all of us in need of godly help and encouragement.

NICKY GUMBEL, vicar at Holy Trinity Brompton; pioneer of the Alpha Course

There's more to your life than you can possibly imagine, and *Never Settle* will help you unlock the door to the more, more, more that God has for you. Prepare to be challenged, inspired, and encouraged with every page.

MARGARET FEINBERG, author of *More Power to You*

I have personally seen the results of Greg's leadership at The Crossing Church. As a guest speaker, I have experienced the hospitality of the staff, the vision of the church, and an organizational culture that never settles for less than their best for God. I'm excited you get to experience that now, too, through Greg's new book. My hope is that you are inspired to do the same. To rise up, dust yourself off (if life has knocked you down), and be reminded—never settle. God's with you. The two of you are a powerful combination.

JEFF HENDERSON, author of *Know What You're FOR*; pastor; entrepreneur

Greg infuses *Never Settle* with the same crackling energy, engaging humor, historical and geographical context, and spiritual truth that he presents in person. This book is alive, inviting and compelling us to fully engage and to fully live!

MIKE MANTEL, CEO of Living Water International

Never Settle is the best of both an all-out challenge to live differently as followers of Christ, and a beautiful reminder of who we are in Him. I could not echo this message more during this time: for people to know that their life matters and that they can live in the abundance of who He calls them to be, today.

SADIE ROB HUFF, speaker; *New York Times* bestselling author of *Live Original*, *Live Fearless*, and *Live*

Never Settle is a practical road map that will lead you out of a lukewarm, bland faith and into a vibrant Kingdom life. Greg calls us to a fresh experience with God—to actively seeking more with Him. With chapters on resilience, hospitality, and the impact of one life, Greg’s encouraging message shines a spotlight on the miraculous things God is doing through ordinary people like us. This book is a perfect addition to any leader’s toolbox because there has never been a more significant time in our culture to vow to never settle.

EDGAR SANDOVAL SR., president of World Vision U.S.

An equally challenging and inspiring book for followers of Jesus to step up. This is a powerful and provocative call to action for leaders in these days—and a needed reminder that we’re made for something more.

BRAD LOMENICK, founder of BLINC; author of *H3 Leadership* and *The Catalyst Leader*

I love that *Never Settle* is a book about culture that isn’t primarily about culture. It puts culture, loving people, and being a world changer into its proper perspective, which is enveloped within the holy Word of God. In such polarizing and confusing times, the church desperately needs to be reminded of the simplicity of this. I cannot “Amen” it any louder!

JOHN L. COOPER, singer; founder of Skillet

I have known Greg for many years. He lives what he writes. And what he’s given us in *Never Settle* is a wake-up call to step into the life God created us for. To play our part in bringing the Kingdom of God to Earth in our everyday lives. And to never settle for anything less than God’s vision for us, for his Church, and for this world!

JARRETT STEVENS, co-lead pastor of Soul City Church; author of *Praying Through* and *Four Small Words*

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FOREWORD

IT WAS 12:00 A.M. in the lobby of a London hotel. A crowd of influencers were surrounding a leader whom I had been watching lead with passion throughout this trip. Different people had encouraged me to meet with him, claiming it was “necessary.” I joined the crowd and yelled, “Greg! Is this our moment?”

Greg yelled back, “Sam! I think it is.”

For the rest of the evening, his team and I wrestled with the complexities of doing ministry in an increasingly post-Christian society. Laughter continued, until his team eventually “threw up the deuces” (which means they left), going back to their rooms for a good night’s rest.

It was now down to only three of us: two African American Christian leaders and Greg, a Caucasian pastor, in a hotel lobby in the heart of London. What would we possibly talk about?

For the next hour, Greg listened, asked questions, and ideated about racism in America and around our world. And then our discussions traveled from ministry and family life to poverty and economic empowerment, from Millennials and Gen Zers to prejudice and our hopes and dreams for the Kingdom. The one rule Greg gave us was to be as honest as possible.

NEVER SETTLE

After that night, I was convinced this man was determined to never settle for the status quo.

A question we should always ask when picking up a book is: *Has the author lived out the concepts and principles of the book he has written?* I can assure you Greg Holder has; I've seen it first-hand. I've also seen what a never-settling mindset can produce: greatness.

So, what about you? Do you believe that God is still up to something in our world? Do you want to leave a legacy? Do you want a life that is more than lukewarm?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, this book is for you. Whether it's the spark that starts a revolution or the missing puzzle piece you've been looking for, this book can inspire and challenge you to live a never-settled life, if you'll let it.

Greg Holder is the real deal. Will you trust him for a few hundred pages, knowing that his heart for you is just as big as his desire to see you unearth everything God has already placed in you?

(By the way, just in case you still care: This is a really good book!)

Sam Collier

International speaker and founder of A Greater Story Ministries

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*Choices, Chain Reactions
& the Way Out*

OUR PLANET AND THIS EVER-INCREASING human herd are in need of some serious—and *I mean supernatural*—help.

Anyone disagree?

Probably not.

Just catch a whiff of the latest scandal or injustice that leaves us outraged, disillusioned, or just plain heartbroken. Listen, if you can stand it, to the pundits shouting so loudly at each other you can hear them two channels over. Everyone has an opinion on what needs to change. Yet nothing seems to change. Watch the splits widen and the rifts deepen between people who used to at least tolerate each other. Feel creation itself tossing and turning beneath our feet and—in the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 8—“groaning” in pain. And that’s before a global pandemic.

So, the world is in need of some serious help.

It's discouraging.
 Even intimidating.
 What are we to do in the face of it all?
 Oftentimes, we settle.

A LOADED WORD

The word *settle* has meant different things to people throughout the years. *Settling down* might be exactly what a young couple wants to do. Small children who are told to *settle down*, however, see it quite differently. To *settle our differences* is a good thing. When the *dust settles*, we're relieved. Most of us will settle debts and some might even settle bets. In the last few decades, the word *settle* picked up another meaning: to accept how things are, no matter how much you might want them to change. Now synonymous with "giving up," everyone from corporate leaders to coaches to innovators to personal trainers exhort us NOT to settle.

For many, it is a word now loaded with defeat.

It might not surprise you to learn that the earliest meanings of the word *settle* were related to the notion of resting. Eventually this led to the idea of making someplace your home. For better or worse, most people can conjure up an image of settlers doing what settlers do on some vast frontier: They stop going any farther. This will now be where they live for the rest of their days. They have *settled*.

We could riff on the history of this word for a few more fun-filled paragraphs, but let's stop here. Notice the connection between the newer meaning and the old one:

To settle is the acceptance of the way things are—even when we long for better.

To settle is also the decision to live in a place for the rest of your days.

When we settle, not only do we stop progressing, we also start putting down roots in a land of less than: less than satisfying, less than interesting, less than helpful, and certainly less than hopeful.

It's a choice we make—a costly one, at that.

A QUICK AND OBVIOUS DISCLOSURE

I wrote this book for anyone who—like me—has been tempted to settle for less than what God has for them. That means this is written from the perspective of someone who follows Jesus and values the Bible as a reliable source of wisdom, guidance, and truth. You may have noticed I've already referenced Scripture. It won't be the last time.

If you are one who struggles to understand such a faith (much less make it your own), you'll find what follows intriguing (I hope) and likely unfamiliar. To keep you in the conversation, I'll often give context to what we just encountered in Scripture before moving on to how it applies to our lives. Along the way, you may notice a rumbling hunger for more of this life and the promises mentioned. When this happens, pay attention. God is up to something, and you're being invited.

For those who already believe, as I do, that Jesus is the world's one true Lord come to set things right, you, too, are being invited to consider bold moves that just might seem as risky and counter-intuitive and (ultimately) as life-giving as any you've made.

Or you can choose to settle.

Rarely do we consciously choose a “less than” life. And yet, it happens. Little by little, we give up. The world is, after all, in serious need of help.

What's the use of trying?

To settle is the acceptance of the way things are—even when we long for better.

PLAYING IT SAFE

“It’s too ugly *out there*,” so the thinking goes. “I’ll just hang out with people with whom I agree until Jesus returns.” And with that, we retreat, raise the drawbridge, and relish our comfort. Meanwhile, the walls of our little fortresses (not to mention our hearts) grow thicker and thicker. In our isolation, we care less and less about anyone who isn’t like us. We play it safe by retreating into comfortable circles of the like-minded.

Is it possible that the historic public health crisis of 2020 made this lurking fear grow even stronger? Followers of Jesus have always struggled with how to engage the world around us, and “social distancing” has only made the question murkier.

I wonder if this is why a recent Barna survey¹ shows that over half of US churchgoers have not even heard of the great commission. Just to refresh our minds: Jesus has been resurrected from the dead and will soon return to heaven, when he gives those first disciples (and the rest of his followers) their marching orders. At the end of the gospel of Matthew, we find these words: *Go and make disciples of all nations.*² This sounds an awful lot like going into the world, not retreating from it.

Were the challenges and dangers any less of an issue when Jesus first gave this charge? Hardly. Across the ages, those of us who have accepted God’s grace through the work of his Son are to engage with those who might not look, sound, or believe like us. Aren’t they, after all, the ones who need to see and hear the very Good News of how much they are loved by the God of all things?

Lest we fall into a common mistake, the great commission involves much more than dropping a couple nuggets of Scripture on our neighbors (though Scripture is certainly part of it). Jesus told us to be “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”³ That’s an awful lot for any who’ve forgotten his

outrageous words of loving, serving, championing, forgiving, and yes, confronting in love.

To turn away from the world God loves in callous indifference is the exact opposite of what Jesus commanded. Lobbing the occasional judgment bomb over the castle walls is another mistake that counters everything Jesus taught.

Perhaps you've noticed how poorly this works.

Such a strategy holds no remedy for that which so disturbs us. Besides, it's terribly impractical for most people. Our daily existence requires we leave the castle every now and then. We still have to go to work or school on most days, or at least pick up the few things that can't be delivered to our homes by Amazon.

What, then, happens when we do go into the world?

BLENDING IN

The volume is already so loud in our world, we reason, the mention of anything objectively true is controversial. Taking a stand against an injustice is too radical. Making peace in a difficult situation is too risky. Such boldness might draw attention to us and our faith. More importantly, it might draw fire from those who disagree.

Instead, we settle for blending into the crowd, the conversation, the community. We choose bland over bold.

Fear lies at the root of this decision. Our short-fused culture will explode at the slightest hint of anything that does not line up with the collective and ever-fluid definition of what is correct. Following in the steps of Jesus will lead us to bold expressions of love, for which our world is aching. Such a life will also fly in the face of this groupthink age.

Following in the steps of Jesus will lead us to bold expressions of love, for which our world is aching.

Live as Jesus taught us and it's only a matter of time before the blowback blows our way.

This leads many to live a camouflaged Christianity. We settle for moving through the world as mere ghosts of our true selves. Present and noticed, but just barely.

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

In making our home in the land of the bland, we begin settling in many ways.

We settle for:

- . . . others doing the work.
- . . . simple answers to complicated issues.
- . . . shallow relationships.
- . . . broad and bruising words.
- . . . small and stunted dreams.

Of course, this list could go on and on, but I'm getting depressed and you're getting bored. How about one more that sums them all up?

We settle for so much less of Jesus.

Who he is and what he still wants to do for us, in us, and through us. That's it. Now we're getting somewhere.

SUPERNATURAL HELP

So, what's the use of trying in this world gone bad?

It might be a fool's errand except for the possibility of *supernatural help*.

Why wouldn't we expect such help?

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."⁴ The rest of the story rests on this truth. Ah, yes, this is a worldview, a way of perceiving reality (more on that in chapter 3) that informs everything. And from the beginning, this loving,

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powerful, artistic, completely-in-control God was in the midst of his creation, interacting with us creatures, who somehow bear his image (chapter 2).

We were made to do magnificent and noble things: to worship our Creator with full hearts, to love one another, and to care for this glorious gift of a home.

Of course, the choice to settle for so much less was first made in Genesis 3. From then on, our rebellion has stained every page of the story, and the effects are as obvious as they've ever been. Again, no breaking news here.

And yet, this is not the end of that story.

From the heartbreak of our first parents' first bad decision until the very moment you're reading this sentence, God has not given up on us or this world he once considered "very good."⁵

This is the foundation on which the rest of this book rests.

He is still at work in ways we can see and celebrate in our next breath (chapter 4). He is also at work in ways we cannot fully comprehend. Not yet. But oh, what our good and gracious God will reveal on that day which will never know the night. Injustice and evil, pain and loss will not have the final word.

Until then, we who live in the early morning—when dawn has only begun to push the darkness away—will live as children of the dawn (epilogue). We trust our King and take the next step. That's my way of letting you know the rest of these pages are not merely a lament of all that is going wrong and just how wrongly we are doing them. In fact, they will often be just the opposite: a reminder of what God is still doing in us, around us, and in spite of us—but often through us. At least what he *could yet do through us*.

Which brings us to the decision each of us makes daily, hourly, moment-by-moment: *Will we settle for less? Or will we choose God's glorious way?*

CHOICES CRACKLING WITH POWER

When I read my Bible, I discover more than a universe-wide plan to heal the battered and beautiful creation I see when I read my newsfeed. I find even more than the redemption of a stumbling human race, though God's plan is certainly all of this. Keep reading and the epic will include the personal. God speaks to Abraham of a nation, an entire world that will be blessed. But he also knows the old nomad by name and visits his home (chapter 11).⁶

Throughout the Scriptures, the vastness of the story always includes the very intimate. What God is still doing is both global and personal. This is the way out: It's both. I am the healed one. The redeemed one called to so much more than I first imagined. For his own good reasons, God is inviting me (and you) to be a part of the healing, the restoring, the making right of his world.

Every choice in your day is crackling with God's redemptive power.

Clearly we will need supernatural help.

What follows, then, are not the great and rapturous triumphs of my life. They are merely truths I've noticed along the way—in Scripture (always), in the bumbling and accidentally interesting moments of my own life, and, mostly, what I have learned from the courage of others who keep teaching me what it means to never settle for less than the next step of obedience . . .

To Jesus. Always Jesus.

Here comes the help.

When he sends us into his broken but loved world in Matthew 28, Jesus also leaves us with a stunning promise: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age."⁷ You want help? Jesus is supernaturally *with us*—his presence, his protection, his power—every step, every moment, every day until the very end.

That means every choice in your day is crackling with God's redemptive power.

Even the smallish moments of your life can start chain reactions of grace and goodness in unpredictable but far-reaching ways (chapter 6). Try to imagine what might yet happen in your next moment on this planet with the God who called everything into existence. He is the same God who calls you by name.

THE WAY OUT OF LUKEWARMNESS

To speak of a "way out" implies movement. Now is not the time to put down roots in the safe and predictable, for it is actually quite dull and deadening. The first step will be to break camp, pull up stakes, and, well, refuse to settle any longer.

What follows is, I hope, a way to re-engage the world God has not abandoned. There will soon be plenty of books devoted to the virus that crippled the world in early 2020. This book was written before talk of quarantines and social distancing. It does now seem, however, that a "way out" will also be a "way back in." The words of Jesus remain timeless, and his call to this different life predates this recent moment in history and will remain long after.

To jar us out of the assumption that we've heard it all before (we probably have) and tried it all before (we probably haven't), we will begin with some of the bluntest (and grossest) words Jesus ever uttered. Once we begin to understand what that famous quote truly means, we'll spend the rest of our time trekking out of the lukewarmness. Yes, I made that word up. But I hope you'll soon agree that it describes a certain kind of life we can no longer live.

Along the way, we'll encounter Spirit-infused ways of thinking and behaving in God's world. There is no formula to this life that refuses to settle, but there are a few mileposts to look for on this way out of a half-hearted existence.

At these everyday intersections, we will have more choices to make. Choices about how we view things (chapters 3 and 4),

about how we react to conflict (chapter 7) and the challenges of life in a broken world (chapter 8). In chapter 9, the decision to wait on God wraps around a harrowing story. Chapter 10 is a twenty-first-century call to choose differently—and wisely—when it comes to our engagement with the digital world. To welcome another (chapter 11) with true hospitality might just be the timeliest of choices for these angry and fearful times.

Each step out of the tepid will set off chain reactions. Each decision can create ripples in our world for the glory of God. With each turn, the Spirit of God is waiting to transform you as he works through you. What happens next is not just for the world around you but for you. As C. S. Lewis reminds us:

Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before.⁸

CHANGES AND CHAIN REACTIONS

The price of a book isn't inconsequential, unless someone gave this to you as a gift (If that's the case, the giver has exquisite taste). But the reading of a book—in a few sittings or over several months—will cost you. It will cost you time, which is valuable. It will cost you the effort of paying attention, which is difficult in these distracting times. It will also cost you the price of living a different life, for changes are not always easy.

So then why are you here, on this particular page of this specific book, in the middle of whatever your today holds? The reasons are many, no doubt. To now speak in lofty tones of how God led you to this page might seem a bit much—how could I possibly know what you need in this very moment? Absolutely true. What I know for sure is that the truth of God has elbowed its way into my thoughts and heart. I am only too familiar with the desperate longing for more than the ordinary.

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I am increasingly aware that God is calling me to more. Perhaps you've sensed the same.

Consider this an invitation to a different way of thinking, of seeing the world, of living in the world.

But I must warn you: It will be a little unsettling.

Once we've settled into the safe and mediocre, pulling away from the status quo is inherently *unsettling*. But even this is a hint we are on the right track. Isn't that what we crave deep down—a different kind of thinking, loving, speaking, and doing that *makes a difference*? Such life doesn't always blend in. Instead, it jolts. It soothes. It heals. It endures. It restores. It leads. Above all, this life loves outrageously well, for without love, the rest amounts to nothing.⁹

This is a life aligned with the God of the universe.

This is a life tapped into the crackling energy of the one who made us for more and loves us more than we can imagine.

This is the way out of lukewarmness, and it will be worth it.

So listen up, buckle up, saddle up—whatever you need to do to get ready—and now, let's hurry up and turn the page . . . for God is still up to something, and the next moment starts now.

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- Consider a time in your life when you settled for less. What choices lead you to that place? How did you feel in that moment?
- What do you hope to gain from reading *Never Settle*?

WHAT MAKES JESUS PUKE

WE WERE IN THE COLD, BLUE OCEAN off the southern coast of South Africa. Three families had piled onto a dive boat for one reason: to watch a few of us get up close and personal with some of the great white sharks that troll those waters. Mind you, myself and two buddies were in a shark cage. But still, the moment beneath the water when one of those beasts lunged and chomped at “my” corner of the cage is still fresh, years later.

That’s why we ventured into those rolling seas that day. That’s why we put on the wet suits and climbed into chilly water looking an awful lot like seals—which, as it turns out, is exactly what these sharks eat. But even that isn’t enough to get their attention. Do you know the quickest way to bring sharks close to that cage? It isn’t by tossing three tourists into the water. It isn’t by bringing a cellist on board to play the theme from *Jaws*.

You appeal to their sense of smell. And what do they smell? Blood. Fish parts. Here’s the technical term: you chum the water.

At this point, my two friends and I are still bobbing in the water (in the cage), waiting for some action to start beneath the surface. Sinking and swaying with every wave, enveloped in the exhaust of the boat engine and surrounded by the slimy slick of fish entrails. People ask, “Can you get seasick IN the water?”

Why yes, yes you can. Especially if one of those buddies—and here is where I’ll stop with the detailed descriptions—decides to chum the waters as well.

But now the point (there’s a point to this?): Whether it’s at sea, in the air, or on dry land, most of us have been that kind of sick. There is something so disagreeable happening inside us that it leads to a moment we’d rather not think about.

Wow.

What an inspiring way to open the book. Why start things off this way? I am so glad you asked.

A SOBERING VISION

The book of Revelation has wild and powerful imagery that has sparked two thousand years of discussion about how to interpret this strange vision the apostle John experienced. Sometimes lost in all that is that John, the last living disciple, writes this letter to encourage specific churches in the last few years of the first century.

In chapter 1, John tells us he is in exile on a volcanic outcropping of an island called Patmos. It’s Sunday, and he’s overwhelmed by the Spirit of God—maybe he’s praying or worshipping or just remembering all the things he saw with his own eyes all those years ago. Who knows? Memories of his days with Jesus, so rich and vivid, could still stir the heart of any worshiper. What we do know is that John hears a blaring voice that tells him to write down all that is about to happen and send it to seven specific churches in Asia Minor, what we would now call the country of Turkey.

Whose voice? Whose words? John makes this abundantly clear throughout. He turns around and sees a face he recognizes, but looks so very different: Jesus in all his glory. “His eyes were like blazing fire. . . . His voice was like the sound of rushing waters. . . . His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” The resurrected Lord of all said, “I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever!”¹

No wonder John collapsed at Jesus’ feet.

Perhaps we, too, should be sobered, for these are the words of the resurrected King of the universe. And while they were meant for very specific situations in John’s day, the sovereign Lord still speaks to churches and Christians throughout the ages.

THE FAMILIAR PUNCH LINE THAT NEEDS EXPLAINING

This will not be a step-by-step account of John’s fantastic vision. Alas, for some, this might be a disappointment. (Sorry.) For others, perhaps those fearing they might be left behind in an elaborate discussion involving charts and timelines, this comes as a relief. Instead, we will allow the shocking words Jesus directed toward one church—at Laodicea—to rattle our thoughts and stir our imaginations. These words will then serve as a backdrop for why the rest of this book even matters.

The punch line in this passage will be familiar to many, yet without context, the way it’s sometimes explained hasn’t been helpful.

“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”²

These are the words of the one who speaks truth because he IS truth. These are the words of the ruler of God’s creation. Never

forget: These are the words of Jesus . . . and he doesn't sound all that pleased.

If Jesus is this upset (and we'll see just how upset in a moment), shouldn't we be bothered? If his words prove to be unsettling, shouldn't we be unnerved? And shouldn't we want a better understanding of what has upset him so?

THE EXPLANATION THAT MAKES NO SENSE

To fully appreciate what's being said, we need a little review of ancient geography. Laodicea. It was founded in the 200s BC and was situated in a river valley along with two neighboring cities. To the north, about six miles on the opposite side of the valley, sat Hierapolis. To the east a few miles upriver was the city of Colossae.

And in between, at an intersection of major trade routes, was Laodicea—well-known and well-off and, well, a city with a church that had lost its way.

Now that we have our bearings, it's time to understand exactly what Jesus is saying to these Christians. Is it, "I'd rather you be for me or against me—don't just sit on the fence?" I remember hearing it explained that way growing up; perhaps you did, as well. We are not alone. Eugene Peterson writes about this passage and the church leaders of his youth: "High on every pastor's agenda was keeping people 'on fire' for Jesus."³ Here's how authors Richards and O'Brien summarize this explanation: "'Hot' (committed) was best, but 'cold' (lost) was preferable to 'lukewarm' (nominal) because it was honest!"⁴ Is that the point here—to keep people's faith "red hot?" And if we can't do that, "stone-cold dead" is better, because at least it's honest?

That makes no sense.

When would Jesus ever want his followers to oppose him in cold indifference? Remember he is speaking to his church, so let's not make this something it's not.

FENCE-RIDING IS STILL TO BE AVOIDED

To be honest, there is a kernel of truth to the point some have stretched to make. If we just sit on the fence and refuse to commit to any action, if we wear a piece of religious jewelry around our neck but the value and meaning of the Cross never seeps into our heart, if we try faking our way through all of this Jesus business, I believe it does affect him greatly.

He's never interested in fence-riding.

God does not want shallow pleasantries and empty words tossed at him anymore than we do. So yes, the further into this discussion we go, the more you'll begin to realize that life with Jesus is ultimately an all-or-nothing proposition. The gospel invitation is intense and demanding—there is too much talk of crosses and dying to suggest otherwise. We cannot and should not avoid that reality.

God does not want shallow pleasantries and empty words tossed at him any more than we do.

But this does not fully explain these strange words.

Fortunately, there are clues in our geography lesson that can help us understand what this punch line meant to those Laodiceans. From there, it becomes much easier to apply Jesus' words to our own lives.

THE EXPLANATION THAT MAKES SENSE

With a bit more background of the region, this passage comes into full view.

The city to the north, Hierapolis, sat atop 300-foot-tall, snow-white cliffs. In fact, today the town is called Pamukkale, or "cotton castle" in Turkish. The calcium deposits still billowing over that cliff are the result of hot springs bubbling out of that hill. You see, this was (and is) a town known for its hot springs.

Two thousand years ago, this was already a spa town.

And why not? When you are injured, sore, or just plain tired, there is something soothing—restorative, some would say—about the water of hot springs. From emperors to commoners, Hierapolis was a place to go for comfort and healing.

The city to the east, Colossae, lies near the foot of Mount Cadmus. Because of its location beside this snowcapped mountain, cold, refreshing spring water always flowed.

Two thousand years after Jesus' words, people bottle water like that and sell it at exorbitant prices.

When your throat's dry and your tongue sticks to the roof of your parched mouth, there is nothing that quenches that thirst like cold, clear water. Water that was abundant in little Colossae.

Now we're getting to the heart of Jesus' message.

To the north were famous hot springs. To the east, the cold, refreshing waters. What word best described Laodicea's water supply? (Go ahead, take a guess.) Lukewarm.

For all of this city's strengths, it had one major weakness: a lack of good water. As a result, water had to be brought in via the Roman aqueduct system. And yes, by the time it got there, the water was neither hot nor cold but lukewarm. What's worse, it was so full of minerals that the water wasn't just warm, it smelled and tasted funny and could actually make you a little sick when you drank it.

I told you we were getting there.

It's easy to see, in this context, how "hot" and "cold" are both good. The hot springs bring healing. The cold mountain streams quench thirst. But the lukewarm, stinky water of Laodicea isn't all that helpful. In fact, it was hard to stomach.

[Jesus said,] "Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

NOW THE GROSS PART

The word translated “spit” is the Greek word *emeo*, from which we get our word *emesis*. In case you’re not connecting these dots, an emesis pan is that funny-shaped thing they give you in the hospital if you’re going to be sick. An “anti-emetic” is medicine given to prevent you from getting so sick you need that little pan. This leads us to the meaning of that Greek verb: vomit. If you’re not going to use a word like vomit or puke or hurl or . . . (that was the absolute limit I was given on this point), then try the old King James translation: “I will spue thee out of my mouth.”

When we get truly nauseated, when something so disagreeable is happening that we can’t stomach it any longer, it leads to a moment we’d rather not talk about.

Jesus has come to such a moment with this church.

Something so unsavory gurgles in the lives of these people that our Savior cannot stomach it any longer. Nor can we ignore it any longer in our own midst. The words of Jesus are clear, and they still apply: *I know your deeds*. The unrivaled and not-to-be-trifled-with God of glory says, “I can see what’s happening, and it’s got to stop.”

THE UNSETTLING TRUTH

What is it that makes Jesus want to puke?

When those who call themselves Christian decide to play it safe and compromise. When people grow so satisfied with how they’re doing in this world that it never occurs to them to bring relief to others. When those whose hearts have been healed, whose destinies have been forever altered, simply forget the spiritually (and physically) thirsty. When those of us who have been graced with new life refuse to engage a dying world desperate for answers.

If such an approach to life disturbs Jesus so much that it makes him sick, we must not look away in faux disgust at his language.

Perhaps it is time for us to be good and disgusted about the right things, to be offended by the mediocre and ineffective. Our Lord is calling us to so much more, and the invitation has never been more timely.

The marching orders of Matthew 28 are clear: Go and tell others the story of the God who loves people enough to make a way, the God who gave up his right to get even . . . tell them about the gift of grace and the promise of his presence. And do something outrageous along the way: Love others as you have been loved. Go into this hurting and desperate world with more than good words. Take action.

Let's be soothing and shocking as the situation calls for. Be hot or cold, but *do* something. By God's grace, the world will change again. But by his grace, so, too, shall we.

Anything less sickens our Savior.

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR

I am so thankful Jesus finishes this very tough talk with words of hope and restoration—*I'm giving you such a stern correction out of love . . . now repent, come back to me.* We'll come back to that word *repent* and this story in a few chapters, because it is just too good to leave alone. For now, notice the last image of Jesus in this passage isn't a shocking one. Well, it is shocking, in its humble and pursuing love.

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.⁵

If we'd just open the door . . . he knows what we were made for. He knows where the story is heading. He knows what we long for and what we're capable of. He knows. He knows what our

relationships can be like. He knows what it will be like for us to connect with what he is still doing in this world. He knows how the world will be blessed if we will but join him.

It will look slightly different at times, this following Jesus into the world. But look closer, for there are similarities.

When you teach a child to read. When you care for a spouse or parent suffering from dementia. When you forgive someone. When you stand against an injustice. When you laugh deeply with someone. When you weep openly with another. When you give with no strings attached. When you intentionally allow the spotlight to find a colleague instead of you. When you whisper words of encouragement. When you serve in small ways most would never notice. When you honor someone older or younger than you. When you build a bridge to someone of a different ethnicity or sexual orientation. When you dare to do any of these things or a thousand others motivated by the pursuing love of Jesus, you are anything but lukewarm. You are hot and cold, soothing and shocking. You are telling his story to a world he has not given up on.

Motivated by the pursuing love of Jesus, you are anything but lukewarm.

This is the beginning of a different life.

And get this: *You were made for such things.*

FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- Take inventory of your heart. Do you feel like you are shockingly cold and soothingly hot? Or does life feel lukewarm these days?
- What's one thing from this chapter that gives you encouragement as you're on this journey?