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**Addressing Spiritual Lethargy:
A Biblical, Theological, and Homiletical Approach**

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Introduction

Called to care for and cure souls, pastors invest a significant amount of time and energy addressing a malady which can be diagnosed as spiritual lethargy. The Apostle Paul urged the

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Thessalonians to avoid succumbing to spiritual lethargy: “so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober” (1 Thess 5:6).² Paul also attempted to rouse those saints in Rome who were in a moral stupor: “The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber” (Rom 13:11, NIV). Peter the Apostle warned believers about the prowling adversary (1 Pet 5:8). In the face of ever-present spiritual danger, all believers must be “in a wakeful activity” taking great pains to be watchful.³

Spiritual lethargy may be defined as a state of indifference and/or inertia regarding one’s own spiritual growth and vitality. A. W. Tozer describes this condition well: “there is little communion and little joy in the Lord. To have a cold heart with little pity, little fire, little love and little worship is spiritual lethargy.”⁴

Some of the most common symptoms of spiritual lethargy include any combination of the following:

- Chronic indulgence in sinful thoughts and actions;
- Little or no desire to pray;
- Engagement in exclusively Christ-less entertainment;
- Avoidance of personal accountability;
- Decreased appetite for Bible study;
- Selfish and materialistic orientation;
- Reluctant and sporadic church attendance.

Some of the above symptoms may be difficult to detect even by observant and discerning pastors. For example, a person who is languishing in spiritual lethargy may still engage in some form of religious activity, albeit in a perfunctory manner. Further, those symptoms do not heal easily. However, pastors should be encouraged by the fact that none of them are incurable. This article will approach spiritual lethargy from three perspectives: biblical, theological, and homiletical.

² All Scripture quotes are from the *Updated New American Standard Bible* unless noted.

³ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Messianic Jewish Epistles: Hebrews; James; 1 and 2 Peter; Jude* (San Antonio: Ariel Ministries, 2005), 379.

⁴ A. W. Tozer, *The Dangers of a Shallow Faith: Awakening from Spiritual Lethargy* (Bloomington: Bethany House, 2012), 20, 55.

A. Biblical Approach to Spiritual Lethargy

The Bible instructs pastors on how to address spiritual lethargy when that lethargy affects those under the pastors' spiritual care. All churches have at least a few members who are dying spiritually. One of the pastor's responsibilities is to wake up and exhort the sleeping and to help restore the dying. By the grace of God, a living remnant can restore a dying church.

1. The Church in Ephesus

The Ephesian Christians were active workers who persevered and remained morally upright. They were theologically orthodox and discerning in doctrinal matters. Despite these commendable qualities, the Ephesian church neglected something essential: "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (Rev 2:3).

To work hard and to persevere do not necessarily guarantee a robust love for Jesus. Neither does being morally upright and theologically astute. The Ephesians did not hate Christ, but their love for Him had lost its depth and fervency. Their once vibrant faith degenerated into a cold orthodoxy. The Good Shepherd urged His sheep and contemporary pastors should urge their flocks to return to their first love.

How does a Christian with an indifferent heart return to Jesus? The Son of God told the Ephesian church: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen" (Rev 2:5a). Protestant Reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli referred to the memory as "a priceless treasury and faithful guardian of past events."⁵ Every believer has the capacity to search and retrieve from their "priceless treasury" memories that recall what their relationship with Christ was like.

Pastors should attempt to stir the memory of the lethargic believer to stir the heart. The following questions may help:

- Do you remember what it was like when you first fell in love with Christ?
- Do you recall the spiritual exhilaration you experienced when you told others about your Savior?
- Do you remember the wonderful sense of anticipation as you scheduled times to converse with Christ?

⁵ John Patrick Donnelly, ed., *Peter Martyr Vermigli: Life, Letters, and Sermons*, The Peter Martyr Library, vol. 5 (Kirkville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1999), 234.

- Do you recall the tears of gratitude and spontaneous praise to your Creator as you gazed at a sunset or other magnificent vistas of God’s creation?

After challenging the Ephesian church to remember their former condition, Jesus commanded them to “repent” of their present condition (Rev 2:5b). Speaking the truth in love, the pastor can challenge the lethargic person as follows: Change your mind immediately about your sinful indifference toward Christ! Determine now to break away from your lifeless religiosity! Reverse the cooling trend by taking steps to rekindle your love for Christ!

In addition to remembering their former condition and repenting of their present condition, Jesus urged the Ephesian believers to resume their former conduct: “do the deeds you did at first” (Rev 2:5c). The deeds they did at first were prompted by love not obligation. With a heart freshly revived, the deeds would now be done with renewed enthusiasm and a deeper sense of satisfaction.

2. The Church in Laodicea

Tragically, there is no commendation for this lukewarm church. Indeed, out of all seven churches in Asia Minor, the church in Laodicea received the severest rebuke. The Great Physician diagnosed their spiritual infirmity: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot” (Rev 3:15).

The spiritually “cold” person is likely “an unbeliever who has rejected the gospel openly and aggressively.”⁶ The spiritually “hot” person is a fervent and enthusiastic follower of Jesus Christ. The spiritually “lukewarm” person is a self-professed Christian who is indifferent. Spiritual lethargy has terrible implications: “to profess Christianity while remaining untouched by its fire is a disaster. There is more hope for the openly antagonistic than for the coolly indifferent.”⁷

Many under-shepherds tolerate the indifference of the spiritually “lukewarm” person. By contrast, the spiritually “lukewarm” person makes the Great Shepherd vomit: “So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:16). Pastors who understand its dangers will not tolerate spiritual lethargy.

⁶ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 306.

⁷ Leon Morris, *Revelation* (Rev ed.; TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 82.

Jesus identified the Laodicean church's boastfulness and blind self-sufficiency as further evidence of their lukewarm complacency. "Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev 3:17). The church in Laodicea grossly overestimated its spiritual condition. Pastors must offer a frank and sobering diagnosis of the lethargic person's true state of health.

In His grace Jesus offered the Laodicean church a remedy for spiritual lethargy. The first ingredient in Jesus' remedy is "gold refined by fire, that you may become rich" (Rev 3:18a). Situated in a wealthy financial center, the Laodicean church needed to buy gold from Christ. The gold symbolized "high quality faith, a faith capable of withstanding trials and one that results in works."⁸

The second ingredient in Jesus' remedy for spiritual lethargy is "white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed" (Rev 3:18b). The Laodiceans needed to clothe themselves in white garments to cover their spiritual nakedness and avoid shame at Christ's return. The white garments represent a new heart inclined toward righteous acts done in faith.

The third ingredient in Jesus' remedy for spiritual lethargy is "eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see" (Rev 3:18c). The Laodiceans needed spiritual discernment from the Great Physician. Only He could open their eyes to their true spiritual condition.

When counseling those who lack these three ingredients, pastors may encourage them to examine themselves to determine whether or not they have truly received Christ as Savior.

After communicating His displeasure over the spiritual lethargy of the Laodiceans, Jesus expressed His love for them: "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline" (Rev 3:19a). The least deserving of the seven churches, the Laodiceans were corrected and instructed by Jesus because of His great love for them. Pastors would be wise to temper their correction and instruction with genuine expressions of love.

This section on a biblical approach to spiritual lethargy represents a very small sampling of the abundant and relevant biblical data.

⁸ Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 314.

Pastors are encouraged to engage in a comprehensive study. The next section on a theological approach to spiritual lethargy is also limited.

B. Theological Approach to Spiritual Lethargy

The Apostle Paul commanded Titus, “But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). “Sound” (ὕγιαυνούση healthful) doctrine promotes spiritual health. Thinking rightly about God is an antidote to spiritual lethargy in that it fosters healthy thinking and living. Among the numerous reasons a person might become spiritually lethargic, the most fundamental cause is a deficient view of God’s character as expressed through His attributes.

The best way to learn about God’s character is to study His attributes revealed in Scripture and in His Son. An attribute is an essential characteristic or quality of a person, thing, or group.⁹

Holiness is an example of one of God’s attributes. A correct understanding of God’s holiness can improve the spiritual health of a believer who is under the dark cloud of spiritual lethargy. Grudem defines God’s holiness as “The doctrine that God is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor.”¹⁰

Isaiah the prophet was not spiritually lethargic. Yet, when he had a life-changing encounter with the Holy One, Isaiah became painfully aware of his need for further sanctification. In fact, his personal encounter with the Holy One caused Isaiah to become burdened over his sin and the sin of his people.

In the year of King Uzziah’s death, Isaiah entered the temple and received a life transforming vision. Attempting to describe his vision, Isaiah recorded, “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne” (Isa 6:1b). Who specifically did Isaiah see sitting on the throne? In John 12:40–41, after quoting Isaiah 6:10, the Apostle writes, “These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him.” Whose glory did Isaiah see? “The Adonai whom Isaiah beheld at that moment was the divine being who is incarnated in Jesus.”¹¹

⁹ Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *Understanding Christian Theology* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 955.

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1243.

¹¹ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on John’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978), 795.

Isaiah reported that “Seraphim stood above Him” (Isa 6:2a). These fiery ones were moral beings hovering in close proximity to the brilliant countenance of the sovereign Holy One. Each of these moral beings had “six wings: with two he covered his face” (Isa 6:2b). The seraphim could not even glance at the Holy One!

“And one called out to another and said, ‘Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory’” (Isa 6:3). The Holy One is unique in His ethical purity. He is sovereign, set apart and unlike any other man including Isaiah. This encounter with the Holy One had a profound impact upon Isaiah. In fact, the phrase “the Holy One of Israel” appears only six times in the rest of the Bible. However, in the book of Isaiah, it appears twenty-six times!

Isaiah recalls, “And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke” (Isa 6:4). The praise of God’s holiness by the Seraphim was powerful enough to rock the foundation stones which supported the doorposts. Likely, Isaiah was prostrate with his face on the floor by the doorway of the Temple. Isaiah was overwhelmed!

“Then I said, ‘Woe is me, for I am ruined!’” (Isa 6:5a). Painfully aware of his desperately sinful state before the Holy One, Isaiah felt doomed to die! Why specifically? “Because I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5b). When we become burdened over our sin, it is wise and spiritually healthy to confess our sins in a specific and concrete manner. A correct understanding of God’s holiness can be life-changing as we become burdened over sin.

Further, while encountering the Holy One we become burdened for service.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, “Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven” (Isa 6:6–7).

Isaiah had just confessed, “I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6:5b). The Holy One met Isaiah right at the point of his need. Today, He does the same for the spiritually lethargic. Convinced that he was about to be struck dead because of his sin, Isaiah instead received divine grace. God’s grace is a powerful motivator for service.

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’” (Isa 6:8a). Isaiah was not coerced nor even

addressed. Yet, because he was overwhelmed by divine grace, Isaiah volunteered to serve The Holy One. “Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” (Isa 6:8b). Isaiah was so burdened for service that he volunteered before he read the job description. While encountering the Holy One, we become burdened for service.

When addressing the needs of the spiritually lethargic, pastors need to teach them the practical implications of sound doctrine. The attributes of God such as His holiness, love, grace, mercy, goodness, omniscience, omnipresence, and immanence all have practical implications. For example, God is omniscient. He knows when our hearts are lethargic and is aware when we are merely going through the motions.

Furthermore, exploring and teaching the practical implications of other doctrines (sin, sanctification, prayer, etc.) will also bear fruit. For example, studying the doctrine of sin will help the spiritually lethargic understand that our fallen nature does not want to worship God or pray because our sinful hearts cater to our fleshly desires. Therefore, our flesh must be subdued daily as we concurrently avoid the influence of the world and the devil.

C. Homiletical Approach to Spiritual Lethargy and Sermon Series

God has spoken in the Scriptures. Therefore, they exist to be made known. The Apostle Paul asks,

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? (Rom 10:14).

The purpose of all preaching is to bring a personal encounter between the God of the Word and the hearer of the Word. “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).

After telling Timothy that all Scripture is God-breathed and “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16b), Paul issued a solemn charge: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). God’s Word is the basis for the solemn charge to preach God’s Word. Preaching is God’s primary and unique means by which His Word is brought effectively to all people including the spiritually lethargic.

Sermon Series: “Addressing Spiritual Lethargy”

Our gracious God has breathed out a multitude of Scripture passages which either directly address or indirectly relate to the problem of spiritual lethargy. The suggested sermon series below is merely one example of what such a series might look like:

Series Title: “Addressing Spiritual Lethargy”

- I. Sermon, Rev 3:1–6: “An Unexpected Wake-Up Call”
Theme: A Living Remnant Can Restore a Dying Church
 - A. Remember How Eagerly You Embraced the Gospel (vv.1–3a)
 - B. Keep Strengthening Faltering Church Members (v.3b)
 - C. Turn At Once from Spiritual Lethargy (vv.3c–6)
- II. Sermon, Rev 2:1–7: “You Have Left Your First Love”
Theme: Return to Your First Love!
 - A. Remember Your Former Condition (vv.1–4, 6, 5a)
 - B. Repent of Your Present Condition (v.5b)
 - C. Resume Your Former Conduct (vv.5c–d, 7)
- III. Sermon, Rev 3:14–22: “Neither Cold nor Hot”
Theme: Christ Has the Remedy for a Lukewarm Heart
 - A. Acquire from Christ a Purified Faith (vv.14–18a)
 - B. Acquire from Christ a Heart Inclined toward Righteous Acts (v.18b)
 - C. Acquire from Christ Spiritual Discernment (vv.18c–22)
- IV. Sermon, Isa 6:1–8: “Transformed by God’s Holiness”
Theme: Encountering the Holy One is Life-Changing!
 - A. Encountering the Holy One, We Become Burdened over Sin (vv.1–5)
 - B. Encountering the Holy One, We Become Burdened for Service (vv.6–8)
- V. Sermon, Hosea 11:1–11: “The Love of God Our Father”
Theme: God the Father Loves His Children!
 - A. God the Father Nurtures His Children (vv.1–4)
 - B. God the Father Disciplines His Children (vv.5–7)
 - C. God the Father has Mercy on His Children (vv.8–9)
 - D. God the Father Restores His Children (vv.10–11)
- VI. Sermon, 2 Cor 12:1–10: “My Grace is Sufficient for You”
Theme: God’s Grace in Christ is Sufficient for Our Every Need
 - A. God’s Grace Provides Christ-Like Humility (vv.1–7)
 - B. God’s Grace Provides Spiritual Strength (vv.8–10)
- VII. Sermon, John 15:1–7: “Spiritual Vitality through Abiding in Christ”
Theme: Believers Must Abide in Christ
 - A. Abiding in Christ Results in Spiritual Cleansing (vv.1–3)
 - B. Abiding in Christ Results in Abundant Fruitfulness (vv.4–6)
 - C. Abiding in Christ Results in Effective Prayer (v.7)

Conclusion

As we defined spiritual lethargy and identified its most common symptoms, we addressed it from three perspectives: biblical, theological, and homiletical. In the section on a biblical approach to spiritual lethargy, our study was limited to two biblical passages which are instructive for pastors who want to know how to address spiritual lethargy in the lives of those under their care.

Revelation 2:1–7 notes some commendable qualities that were still evident in the Ephesian church. Yet, the Ephesian Christians had left their first love, Jesus Christ. To reverse the cooling trend, pastors must urge the spiritually lethargic to take the following steps in to rekindle their love for Christ: 1) remember your former condition, 2) repent of your present condition, and 3) resume your former conduct with a renewed enthusiasm.

The contents of Revelation 3:14–22 were sent to the lukewarm church in Laodicea. Pastors who understand the dangers of such a lukewarm condition should resolve to never tolerate spiritual lethargy in the lives of those whom they serve. Rather, they should offer a frank diagnosis and stir a sense of need within them. Each lethargic person should be urged to seek Christ for the following: a robust faith, a new heart inclined toward righteous acts, and a spiritual discernment. Finally, pastors should balance their corrective activities with genuine expressions of love.

The section on a theological approach rests upon the conviction that sound doctrine is a healthy antidote to spiritual lethargy. One root cause is a deficient view of God’s character. God’s holiness serves as an instructive model for searching out the practical implications of relevant doctrines in addressing the needs of the spiritually lethargic. A correct understanding of God’s holiness can move the complacent to become burdened over sin and burdened for service. In addition to God’s attributes, doctrines such as sin, sanctification, and prayer can also help the spiritually lethargic.

The section on the homiletical approach is undergirded by two complementary convictions: first, God has spoken in the Scriptures, and second, preaching is God’s primary means by which His Word is brought effectively to all people, including the spiritually lethargic. The sermon series, “Addressing Spiritual Lethargy,” is offered as merely one example of how to approach the subject from the pulpit.

Pastors are encouraged to search the Scriptures and construct a sermon series which directly addresses the issue of spiritual lethargy within their congregations. Spiritual vitality in the pulpit will help cure spiritual lethargy in the pew.

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