

# Apathy

Good morning, great to see everyone again. My name is Eric if I haven't had the chance to meet you. Go ahead and turn to Revelation chapter 3, we'll be there in just a minute. We kicked off a new series last week called *Killjoys*. We're spending 7 weeks talking through how to identify and how to deal with some of the most common, and most destructive, threats to a Christian's walk with Jesus. Last week, Kent kicked us off talking about *busyness*. The thing our culture often tries to sell you as a badge of honor. And today we're diving into another really prevalent, and sometimes incredibly sneaky, one.

## Apathy.

When we were first talking about doing this series over a year ago, I remember specifically thinking, "whichever topic I teach, I *definitely* don't want to do apathy." Felt a little too personal. Which was a great indicator that I needed to volunteer for it. I, like pretty much everyone, consistently struggle with several of the topics we're covering in this series. But *apathy* in particular has regularly plagued me like few others.

Many times throughout my life, people have said things like, "you're so chill," or, "you're so laid back. How are you so relaxed?" Things that I took as high praise. But the reality most of the time was that the only thing I *cared* a lot about was *not caring* about things. I just didn't care. That was my secret. If I don't care, I can't be stressed. I can't be worried or troubled or anxious about anything if I don't care about anything. And it ended up leading to all kinds of different problems for me. When you don't care about relationships with people, friendships suffer. When you don't care about class or work, your performance tends to suffer. When you don't care about hygiene and cleanliness, *everyone* suffers. The list goes on.

And I think it's easy for a lot of us to identify how that example can end up being harmful. The example of me, a lazy 20 something without motivation neglecting all semblance of adult responsibility. I was so concerned with making sure I came across with a laid back attitude, that I couldn't be concerned with becoming more like Jesus. But it's also easy for us to miss the *real* problem underneath it. Because the *real* problem can work itself out in many different ways. What about the workaholic spouse? The person who spends all their time and energy and personal bandwidth on their career at the expense of the emotional and personal needs of their family. There's an *apathy* towards their familial responsibilities and investing in the lives of the people who live in the same house. Or consider the single Christian who bounces around from one romantic relationship to another and strings people along to make sure *they* always feel desirable. They're *apathetic* towards their need for an identity that's secure in Jesus and the responsibility

to point others to *Him*. They'd much prefer to fill their time and use their energy making sure they feel like someone *wants* them romantically.

*Today*, we're talking specifically about *spiritual* apathy. When you know that Bible reading, prayer, church involvement, missions, evangelism, caring for people, living an emotionally healthy life, all the staples of following Jesus should capture your heart, but you just can't seem to muster up any interest in them. When you're more or less *indifferent* to a relationship with Jesus and all that it entails. See, the problem with this apathy is not so much a *lack of caring* about everything in life altogether. I heard author and Bible professor Uche Anizor put it really helpfully:

*"The paradox of apathy is that we are captivated by the things we don't really care about and are lukewarm to the things that, in our heart of hearts, mean the most to us. We don't act on what we should act on, but we are awakened to things we should probably ignore."*

Uche Anizor

Captivated by the things we don't really care about and lukewarm to the things that mean most to us. This is the exact situation going on in the passage we're looking at today. We're looking at [Revelation 3:14-19](#). Just for context, this is a portion of Revelation where we read from letters Jesus has written to 7 different churches offering some encouragement and talking about some things they need to be working on. But then he gets to the church at Laodicea. *All* the other letters, even if they contain correction, have something the church is doing well. But not so much with Laodicea. Take a look with me:

*"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. 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."*

Some translations actually say "vomit you out" instead of "spit." There's a lot of really interesting things being referenced here, so I'm going to speed through some history for everyone so we can better understand what exactly Jesus is getting at. Laodicea was an ancient city that was quite wealthy for the time. It was essentially the financial center of its part of the world. But they had a significant water problem. Laodicea was in a location that didn't have its own good source of water. Because they were so wealthy, they were able to construct two large aqueduct systems from neighboring towns who *did* have water.

So these two neighboring cities were Hierapolis and Colossae. Hierapolis had a hot spring and Colossae had a river fed by consistent ice runoff, so it was frigid. Hot water was good for cleaning and bathing, it was thought to have healing properties, and high mineral contents, it had lots of *usefulness*. And cold water was refreshing, it was clean, it was fresh, it was good for drinking. It was wonderful. *But* because they had to transport the water through these aqueducts, by the time it got to Laodicea, it was no longer hot or cold. It wasn't nearly as *useful*. Historically, water was useful for different things if it was either *hot* or *cold*. Sure, what Laodicea ended up with *was* water, but by comparison to the good stuff?

I would argue, we think pretty similarly today when it comes to water and drinks in general. Anyone in here like coffee? The amount we go through here on Sundays is telling. I personally love coffee. I drink what I am told is inordinate amounts, but I feel that's debatable. Odds are pretty good if you walk down the street to Honeybee and say you want what Eric at City Church gets, they'll probably know what you mean. I love fresh hot coffee. I exclusively order a black Americano, at least in part, because it's always made fresh and is always piping hot. It's never too hot for a hot coffee. But I also know many people enjoy an iced coffee or cold brew when it's particularly warm out. So crisp and refreshing. You know what no one does? Walk into a coffee shop and say, "hey, do you guys have any coffee you poured like 2 hours ago and left on the counter? Could I get one of those?" Have you ever had the experience where you lost track of time and picked up your *formerly* hot coffee expecting that delightful hug of warmth and joy only to get something the same temperature as your saliva? Or an iced coffee you left in the car and absent-mindedly took a swig of the tepid watered down disaster it's become? It's nasty.

That's how Jesus is describing the entire church at Laodicea. He's saying, "I wish you were like either hot or cold water. I wish you were *useful*, I wish you had *passion* in your lives for things that *matter*. But instead you're just lukewarm. You just don't *care*, and it makes me want to vomit you out." Not exactly the Sunday school drawing of sweet Jesus surrounded by children and petting a baby lamb. At first glance this seems pretty harsh. What would make Jesus say something that strongly? What could they possibly be doing to make Jesus "want to vomit [them] out"? Jesus goes on to elaborate on their situation. Keep reading:

**You [the Laodiceans] say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.**

Jesus tells us right here where they've ended up. They've arrived at a place in their lives where they say, "I do not need a *thing*." I don't care about the things Jesus cares about. I feel like I have pretty much everything I need in life, so I guess I don't *need* him. **They had gotten to a place where they were completely blind to their need for him because they had gone so long without *caring* about him and without pursuing him. The sum of all their apathy brought them to a place where they were completely separated from Jesus.**

And you may feel like you're in a similar place. Or you might not feel like you're anywhere close to that point, but you may still deal with apathy in your life. And it could take many different forms. Apathy could look like a pattern of just not really caring about LifeGroup and community. Maybe you routinely or *consistently* feel things like, "I know LifeGroup is tonight, but I'm kind of tired. Work was just a lot today. I didn't love the sermon this week so I don't really feel bothered to go. The person I enjoy being around isn't going to be there, and the couple people who kind of annoy me are, so no thanks." Maybe deep down you know it would be really good for you to spend more intentional time with your kids. But honestly you'd much prefer to throw on a show again for the fifth night this week and scroll on your phone. Maybe you feel or your spouse has said it'd be really helpful for you to step in and help parent a little more together, but it's much more enticing to chill on the couch again. It could be that you know it would be super helpful to have filters or restrictions on your phone to help have an additional barrier between you and porn, but it's way easier to not bring it up and just hope for the best next time instead of taking active steps. Or maybe when you're around people, you know it'd be really good to engage with them and show hospitality and extend love to them, but it's just easier to check Instagram again or exclusively talk to the people you already know and like instead. Or maybe when needs come up in LifeGroup, and your default is to just think, "surely someone else is going to take care of that. Someone else will deal with it." Or maybe you know you should spend more time in prayer and reading Scripture, but honestly it feels kind of boring, so you'll keep waiting until it seems more exciting. Or until some crisis comes up. It could be any number of different patterns in your life, but apathy can really easily sneak its way in. And it's not that any *one* decision derails your life.

The reality is, the church at Laodicea didn't just wake up one day and decide to be completely apathetic towards Jesus. They weren't growing and worshiping and loving Jesus and then suddenly decide "let's start not caring about that now." Chances are, what happened to them is what happens to all of us. They made a series of decisions that eventually led them to a place of complete apathy. Over the course of years or maybe decades, this is what happens. We make a thousand tiny decisions about how to live our life that eventually lands us separated from and apathetic towards God and the things of God.

So what I want to do with our time today is unpack a few things I think can cause apathy towards Jesus in our lives. I don't think it's an exhaustive list, but there are a few things I've seen pretty consistently lead people to a place of spiritual apathy. Then I want to talk about what it can look like for us to address those things, and hopefully will help us avoid ending up in a similar situation to the Laodecians. Like Kent mentioned last week with the symptoms of busyness, you might identify with one of these or several of these. You might already be aware of it or this may be the first time thinking about it, but the goal is to be helpful in identifying potential causes of apathy so we can address them, and hopefully move in the direction of a more thriving relationship with Jesus. Here we go, first cause of spiritual apathy I've seen:

## Unconfessed sin

One potential cause of spiritual apathy is choosing to walk in disobedience to God in an area of life and not acknowledging or confessing it. Or multiple areas. We see in Scripture the *danger* of not confessing our sin. Here's what David says in [Psalm 32:3-4](#) when talking about living in unconfessed sin:

*“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.”*

Have you ever woken up on a beautiful Saturday morning in July feeling rested and eager for a day filled with fun? You have a delicious breakfast, a fresh cup of coffee, you put on that outfit that always makes you feel like you can take on the world. You're ready. Then you walk outside into the swift and merciless backhand of heat and humidity that is Summer in the South. Instantly sweating, your breathing feels stifled, day ruined. Just go back inside. If you've recently moved here from another part of the country, it's something to look forward to in a few months. But *that feeling* is how David describes his entire relationship with God when he “kept silent” about his sin. This *blah* feeling. Not thriving, not growing, not eager for fellowship with the Father. This feeling of wasting away. Your strength is *sapped*, and over time, so is your desire to do anything about it.

It's not so much that any time we sin, God distances himself from us. That's not the case. **But when we repeatedly choose to sit in the reality of our sin instead of in the reality of the cross, we distance ourselves from God. God stays in the same place, but we construct a wall between ourselves and him. And we lock ourselves on the other side of it.** So it could very well be that living in unconfessed and unrepentant sin has led you to a place of feeling distant and possibly outright *cold* towards God.

Another potential source of our apathy could be...

## Neglecting spiritual disciplines

When we neglect to spend *intentional* time in fellowship with God, it inevitably causes us to be less and less interested in it. You can't grow in your affections for something when you don't invest in it. **Think about any relationship ever. Imagine you have a spouse or girlfriend/boyfriend or any close friend, and you say to them, "love this whole relationship thing we've got. How about we spend an hour or so a week together? I think it'll really help this relationship thrive."** That sounds ridiculous because we all *know* that's not how any relationship actually works. Without consistent, intentional time invested, a relationship will not grow. And also you start to see a phenomenon happen: the less time you spend with someone, the less likely they are to be on your mind and heart.

Paul draws a really similar connection between our habits and a spiritual *deadness* of sorts in **Galatians 6:7-8**. He says this:

*"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. [Pay close attention here] Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."*

So if the spiritual disciplines are the *primary means* by which we grow in our relationship with Jesus, it's easy to see that neglecting them will create distance between us and Christ. One last cause of apathy I want to talk about is directly related to what we talked about last week, and it's...

## Filling our minds with triviality

Filling our minds with things like TV shows, social media, gaming, constant cable news. While none of those are *bad* in and of themselves, they can quickly fill our time and our minds to capacity. Spiritual apathy and busyness are often far more connected than we'd like to think. We've said it every year in our *Formation* series, and we'll keep saying the quote by James K.A. Smith: "the things we do do things to us." Our minds are going to be filled with something. And whatever we fill our minds with is going to form us. We live in a time and a society that exalts entertainment and personal enjoyment above almost everything. There are countless things vying for our attention, constantly being thrown in our faces, to the point where we are unable to distinguish between what is and isn't important. One author named **Neil Postman** said it this way:

*"The public has been amused into indifference."*



And the most dangerous thing about it is we often can't even see it. Because we can't see the *magnificence* and *glory* and *beauty* of spiritual things in a world filled with 24/7 entertainment. We are consumed by the trivial and blind to the glory of Christ. The irony is it's so clear to us that indifference to something significant is a cause for concern when it comes to other things in our world. Let me show you what I mean. When I stand at my kitchen sink washing dishes, I can look out a window into my backyard. And it's *fine*. It's decently large, relatively flat, it has a fence that's mostly intact, but it's unremarkable. And I look at it, and it stirs nothing inside me. Other than a little bit of dread when I consider how long it's been since I've picked up after the dog. But I'm not awed or moved, because it's remarkably unremarkable. Now think about if I was standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, or Victoria Falls, or surrounded by the majesty of the Himalayas, and I had the same response. "Meh. Pretty lame." Unless I'm an ornery 15 year old, that'd be a pretty odd thing for me to say. Because that's absurd. It's clearly *brehtaking*. Something that incredible, that magnificent, should stir something inside of me.

The same would go for tragic things too. If someone were to come to me with horrific news about a sudden death of a loved one or a personal disaster of some kind, and my response was to shrug and say, "oh well," you would correctly think, "what is *wrong* with you??" Because something clearly is. How could you look at something that is so *worthy* of your attention and not care about it?

But that's exactly what happens when it comes to spiritual things. In a world that is so full of *stuff* that has no eternal significance, it becomes more and more difficult to feel the weight of something that is *actually* a big deal. When we fill every moment of our lives with feeble attempts to find meaning or to distract ourselves, we just don't have the *capacity* to care about things that truly matter. If you didn't have a chance to listen to the teaching from last week, I would highly encourage you to do so. It unpacks this idea in much more detail, but I do think it is one primary source of spiritual apathy in followers of Jesus.

I think with all three of these, and I'm sure with other potential causes of spiritual apathy, the end result is something really similar to the Laodiceans we mentioned from Revelation earlier. Through their indifference towards the things of God, or through being lukewarm, they eventually got to a place where they just felt like they must not *need* him. Unaddressed apathy eventually builds up a callous towards God. The thousands of decisions we make or don't make over time lead us to a place of perceived self-sufficiency. "I don't *care* all that much about the things of God, so I must not really *need* God."

But the beauty of the gospel is that we don't have to sit in our apathy. We don't have to end up being completely indifferent towards God to the point that we feel like we don't need him. Jesus gives us the solution at the end of the Revelation passage. Look back at the very end: Jesus says, **"So be earnest and repent."** Now maybe that seems like an odd instruction for how to not be apathetic: "be earnest and repent." You might be thinking, "but see, that's the problem: I don't *feel* earnest and I don't *want* to repent. I'm apathetic. That's kind of the whole problem." We tend to think that if we don't have a desire for the things of God, there's nothing we can do about it. We're just perpetually stuck until we start caring again. Until we have the *desire* to repent, we won't be able to.

But if you hear nothing else today, please hear me say this: **you are not enslaved to your desires.** If you are in Christ, you are adopted as a child of God and you are not a slave to your desires. Even if your desires *right now* are for things other than Jesus. Even if it feels like you just don't have a desire for the things of Jesus, or you are apathetic towards him, you do not have to stay there. Jesus said it clearly in his letter: be earnest and repent! Think about it in the context of other sin struggles. If someone was cheating on their spouse and you told them they should repent, and they said, "see, I would, but I don't feel like it." You would hopefully tell them, "honestly, that's completely irrelevant. You should repent, and as you repent, you should also ask God to change your heart towards that sin." The same goes for apathy. A lack of desire for God is something you *can* repent of.

It can sound so simple. But if you've ever been in a place of apathy, that can feel insurmountable. So I want to end today just talking through what it can look like to take steps towards Jesus and away from our apathy. And I want to make it very clear, these are *steps*. And the nature of steps is that they need to be repeated over time with consistency to accomplish anything. We have to remember, we end up in a place of apathy gradually over time. It doesn't happen immediately. We make 1000 tiny decisions before we find ourselves completely distant from God. So it makes sense that overcoming apathy would be a long-term process too.

So here's a spoiler for you: the steps *out* of apathy are pretty much the same as the steps *into* it. Just reverse engineered. So here we go, the big picture categories that can have many different practical outworkings in your life. First:

### **Cultivate honesty in community**

Cultivate honesty. Honesty as a follower of Jesus means consistently confessing our sin and need for Jesus to other followers of Jesus. As with everything that is harmful to our walk with Jesus, apathy thrives in darkness. Apathy towards God sinks its teeth deepest



in isolation. So regularly practice confession. And confess *concretely*. I've said it before in a sermon, but we sin in specifics so we should confess in specifics. Including apathy.

And part of cultivating honesty is choosing to be around and confess to people who will push you towards Jesus in that area. If you only ever selectively confess that you're struggling with gossiping to the people with whom you are gossiping, odds are slim they will challenge you to grow or call you out on it when they see it. If I only talk about how I'm struggling with apathy towards reading the Scriptures with people who haven't cracked open a bible a single day in their life, no one is going to end up reading Scripture more as a result.

Choose to spend time with people who will push you towards Jesus. Spend time and cultivate honesty with people who will hold you accountable in your walk with Jesus. And *be* that person for others. Be the person who follows up. Strive to be the person who sets reminders to text the person who said they tend to struggle most right before they go to bed with whatever they confessed.

1 John 1 tells us there is no *darkness* in God. It says we should confess our sins to one another, and we are to "walk in the light, as he is in the light, [and] have fellowship with one another."<sup>1</sup> The book of James says, "confess your sins to each other and pray for each other."<sup>2</sup> So we should be actively cultivating honesty with one another. Next...

### Cultivate affection for God

Cultivate affection for God and the things of God. How do we do that? How do we grow in affection? I talked briefly about it earlier, but one primary way we grow in affection in *any* relationship is through intentional time. And with God it's no different. Spend time with God. Spend time in prayer. Spend time reading and meditating on Scripture. Spend time cultivating spiritual disciplines. And you can start small. Remember, we said change is gradual and takes consistency. So start wherever you are now.

~~If you drive to work or commute to class, spend the first 5 minutes of your trip in prayer. Pick a different kind of prayer each day of the week. On Monday, spend 5 minutes thanking God for specific things in your life. On Tuesday, spend 5 minutes praying on behalf of people who are in your life. On Wednesday, spend 5 minutes praying for opportunities to bring up Jesus with your coworkers or classmates.~~

~~Set a goal to read one chapter of Scripture each day. Read when you wake up, or on your lunch break, or before bed even. That's a goal Sara and I have in our day to day life. We try to read at least a chapter each day out loud together. Ask someone else in~~

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 John 1:5-10

<sup>2</sup> James 5:16

~~your life what they've been reading in Scripture, and share with them something you've read or learned recently.~~

~~Fast once a week or once a month or however frequently you are able. We just spent 4 weeks talking about this one, so I won't go into much detail. But it's a great way to intentionally cultivate affection towards God by devoting our attention and energy towards him.~~

If you go to our website and click on "Teaching," you will find five different spiritual disciplines we've taught in detail over five years. We gave some extremely practical ways to learn about and implement those disciplines in your life. We've covered prayer, bible reading, rest or sabbath, mission, and this year, fasting. Start by picking one and dive in. Then start working in some others as you go.

Lastly...

### **Cut back on trivialities**

A lot of what Kent talked about last week in regards to eliminating busyness would fall into this category. But I also want to list a few specific examples of what repentance and proactiveness can look like in this area. For some people in the room, the most beneficial thing for your relationship with Jesus right now might be canceling Netflix or HBO. Sometimes the best way to get the ball rolling on change is to remove the source of whatever is consuming your time. Similar to the idea of "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off" like Jesus talks about in terms of repentance.

Another potential for you might be deleting or at least limiting social media. That could be Facebook, or Instagram, or Reddit, or TikTok, or whatever it is for you. One person I know is taking one day off per week, one week off per month, and one month off per year of all social media. That could be a great option for you, especially if you are unable to remove them or it seems like too big of a barrier.

Maybe for you it's staying off online shopping platforms. Even if you aren't buying everything, some of us still spend hours upon hours browsing and dreaming about what it would be like to have whatever we want at the click of a button. Often at the expense of spending our time prioritizing relationships, both with people and with God. Maybe you can accomplish all of these things in some part by just restricting your phone's screen time. Almost all modern phones have a feature where you can set time limits on certain apps, and when you reach it, they lock. And they're password protected, so give it to someone in your LifeGroup or your spouse and let them set the password so you don't know it and can't bypass it. I'll be totally honest, I probably need to do this. I checked

before teaching today and my *daily* average screen time on my phone is 5 hours. That's pretty excessive and I'm not proud of it. And it certainly puts into perspective how much wiggle room I *actually* have in my daily life. And if you hear that and think, "5 hours isn't too bad," this one is certainly for you. I want to encourage everyone to consider at least some of these. It will probably look different for different people, but I am confident that at least most of us in the room would benefit greatly from pushing back against apathy in some of these ways.

I'm sure the list could go on and on, but the point is we don't have to stay stuck in apathy. We are invited into so much more. And not only are we invited, we are also *empowered* through God's Spirit to do so. All of these things we can do to move away from apathy and towards *zeal* for Christ are given life through the Holy Spirit. The *same Spirit* that raised Jesus from the dead is the Spirit who lives in all followers of Jesus. And it's the Spirit who gives life to all our efforts.

I want to end with a passage from Romans 12:

***10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.***

"Never lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." The point of all this is not just "do better." The point of all this is that we have something *worth* caring about. The work of Jesus on the cross and the majesty of the Father who welcomes us in is worth caring about. And what better example do we have than Jesus? There is no greater display of passion, of zeal, of love than Jesus' sacrifice for us. And we are invited to follow in his footsteps.

