

The revelation of Jesus Christ

## Lesson # 12 The Church at Laodicea Revelation 3: 14-22

Date: Sunday, January 17, 2010

*<sup>14</sup>"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. <sup>15</sup>"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! <sup>16</sup>So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup>For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. <sup>18</sup>I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. <sup>19</sup>Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. <sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. <sup>21</sup>The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

It is this letter to the church at Laodicea that tends to stand out in people's minds when they think of the letters to the 7 churches. The imagery within this letter is not only graphic, but is all too familiar when we compare it to our own church experience - Christ knocking vainly at the church door; vomiting the church out of His mouth; the church's claim to be rich vs Christ's declaration that they were poor; etc.

It is the fact that is letter # 7 and contains no commendation, and the most stinging rebuke of any of the 7 letters which prompts many to interpret the letters as a snapshot of the progression of church history over time. Certainly, the things this church is rebuked for could be seen as parallels for much of what sadly passes for Christianity today, but by the same token, there are other eras of church history when the church at large seemed to mimic Laodicea as well. ①

We have seen Ephesus where the doctrine was good, but love was missing; Pergamum which had not denied Christ but had tolerated sin; Thyatira where there was partial good but many were involved in gross sin; Sardis had a few believers but was mostly spiritually dead. Smyrna & Philadelphia received no real rebuke; but Laodicea is a different story – this is the unregenerate church – to which Jesus has no words of commendation for, but only scorn.

### Laodicea

The city was located in the Lycus River Valley – at the SE end of the postal loop for these 7 churches. It was 45 miles SE of Philadelphia, and 100 miles east of Ephesus. It was an important city – a center on the trade route for all NS & EW travel, near Colossae & Hieropolis. It was founded by Antiochus II in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC.

It is now modern day Eskeihizar which means “the Old Fortress”. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD it had a large Jewish population according to archaeological records which recorded the gold shipments sent to Jerusalem to pay the Temple tax, which Jews, even those abroad, had to pay annually. The amount of gold recorded on the ancient documents indicates at least 1 large synagogue and probably a few of them were in Laodicea.

One of the most crucial elements of an ancient city's survival was the consistency of its' water supply, and Laodicea was no exception. Local streams were inadequate, and water had to be brought in. The Lycus River dried up during the winter months and the water from it was usually very dirty anyway. They had built an aqueduct underground to funnel water into the city, but it was vulnerable to attacks and sieges. Laodicea never became a major military power as a result of this crucial weakness. The pipes eventually became clogged with calcium and other minerals, and because it came from a distance, by the time it reached Laodicea, it was lukewarm.

Laodicea was a commercial banking center, due to its' location on the trade route, so it was a wealthy city, in fact, so wealthy that when an AD 60 earthquake decimated it, Laodicea refused Rome's offer of monetary assistance to rebuild, and then rebuilt an even more beautiful city on their own ( according to Tacitus – a Roman historian ). It also had a major wool industry, especially black, soft wool used for clothing and carpets. On top of that, it had a medical school associated with the temple to Asklepios, "the 'god' of healing". Here, they developed an eye salve which apparently worked because the city became famous for this eye salve, and many traveled here to get it.



This is the symbol called "The Staff of Asklepios" – symbolic of the practice of medicine.

It is interesting that all 3 of these major sources of income & fame play a role in the letter from Jesus to the church at Laodicea.

The church here was likely founded by Epaphras ( Col. 1:7 ), Paul's companion. There is no mention of Paul ever having gone there but it is thought that Epaphras evangelized the Lycus Valley area. According to Paul's letter to Philemon ( v. 22 ), he had not been to Colossae himself as of the early AD 60's. The letter to the Colossians may have actually been read in both Hieropolis & Laodicea due to their proximity. In that letter, Paul deals with a heresy that had cropped up in the region of Colossae that stated that Jesus was a created being and not God in the flesh. Note **Col. 1:15-23** and cf, **Rev. 3:14c**. We'll see what John means by this shortly, but take notice of the letter of Christ to Laodicea compared to Paul's letter to the Colossians ( and likely Laodicea ).

So we now see the city of Laodicea in AD 95, still self-sufficient, wealthy, on the cutting edge of commerce and medicine and yet, in that church, there was a spiritual black hole – an apathy about God that made Christ sick. This church represents the lost church, the church in name only, the church of apostates, which has always existed in Christianity in every century and in every place the church has been established for any length of time.

In our own day, it is most easily paralleled by the increasingly liberal trends in most denominations; the careless mishandling of or complete ignorance of God's word; the never-ending schemes of godless hucksters drawing people to 'church' through misleading worldly advertising; the inability of the 'church' to impact the culture; the worldly desire of the church to store up treasure on earth rather than in heaven; the post-modern ( and even post-Christian ) attitude that we can't really know truth for sure so we can't claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation; the questioning of God's

sovereignty, fairness & goodness; the elevation of the importance of man; the crumbling faith of this tenuous generation and the certainty of minimal faith in the next; a strong desire to be entertained rather than to worship God; etc. etc.

## I. The Speaker

v. 14

Jesus identifies Himself to this church by 3 titles: “the Amen”; “the faithful & true witness”; and “the beginning of God’s creation”.

### The Amen

In our culture, ‘amen’ is used chiefly to end a prayer or occasionally to affirm verbally our agreement with a speaker’s words or to show appreciation to a musician who has just played or sung a beautiful song during our worship time. The word ‘amen’ carries the meaning of “truth” or “agreement” – KJV – “verily” or “truthfully”. In Isaiah 65:16, God is called the “God of Amen” or the “God of Truth” (ESV), and we receive comfort in knowing that He is the God of truth, of certainty, One whose word can be trusted (JN 17:17) to a “T”. “Amen” means truth, firm, fixed, certain, faithful, unchangeable<sup>i</sup>.

Why does Christ take this as a title for Himself? It could be a reference to Isaiah 65:16 (I am God), but it has more to do with His truthfulness and His certainty. In fact, II Cor. 1:20 tells us, <sup>20</sup>*For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.* IOW, all of God’s promises and covenants are guaranteed & completed by the work of Christ. Forgiveness is only in Him; and in Him are found mercy & love; grace is expressed through Him; the Kingdom will come by Him; it is in His righteousness that we find eternal life – all in Christ alone<sup>③</sup>  
 Note **Rom. 11:33-36; Col. 1:15-20.**

### Faithful & True Witness

This follows on the heels of “the Amen” - because He is true, everything He says & does is the truth. He is 100% trustworthy, so that whatever He promises, we can be certain that it will come to pass. He is God in the flesh, so much so that He made statements like those found in **JN 10:30; 12:49-50 & 14:7-11**. His assessment of the church can be trusted – they may not like it, but they cannot argue that He has misjudged them.

### The Beginning of God’s Creation

Unfortunately, the translation here can be misleading, making it appear that Jesus is saying He was born first. What is really being said is that He is the source of creation – the beginner of it, not its’ first creature! See Romans 8:29 – pre-eminence, not prima-genitor.

It is likely that Laodicea and Colossae were battling a similar issue with regard to the deity of Christ. Paul, in his letter to Colossae is also making mention of those in Laodicea – **Col. 2:1; 4:13-16** – because the letter is designed to help those churches see that Christ is God in the flesh and that He is pre-eminent – cf. Col. 1:13-20. The city of Hieropolis was also a neighbour to these 2 cities and was also being influenced by the false teaching that Jesus was created. It may have been this very heresy that drew Laodicea away from God and now Jesus implores them to realize who He is before it’s

too late. Errant doctrines about Jesus' person always leads to an unregenerate church, and you can see this today in Jehovah's Witness doctrine, Mormon doctrine, liberal theology, emergent theology, etc.

The same idea of Christ's Godhood is found in verses like **Rev. 22:13; JN 1:1-3,14,18**. This 3-fold title of Christ to open this letter should have spoken volumes to this church, even before they got into the body of the letter.

## II. Their Works / Lukewarm

vv. 15-16

Our works as believers always reveal our spiritual health to God. We may be able to fool people by hypocritical actions but God is never fooled because He looks on our hearts. Here, Jesus informs the church that He sees not only their hearts, but the works that find their impetus within their hearts. Note James 2:14-26; Matt. 6:1-6; 7:15-23.

At this church, the works were mediocre, apathetic, listless and not whole-hearted by any definition of the word. Christ identifies their works as neither hot nor cold – lukewarm. There is little that is good about lukewarm. Lukewarm coffee or tea is terrible; lukewarm soda is almost undrinkable; lukewarm water is not thirst quenching, and a lukewarm bath or shower just doesn't cut it. Since their works were lukewarm, Jesus could not embrace their efforts at religion. This was not true worship in spirit, but a system of rote moralism, much like we see in the book of Malachi as God rebukes Israel for the same type of thing – duty without passion or love.

Jesus uses the comparison of their works to their water supply to illustrate how He reacts to half-hearted worship. Colossae had access to cool spring water for drinking, and Heiropolis had hot springs which had therapeutic value but Laodicea got their mineralized tepid water from their underground aqueduct which was barely potable, not thirst quenching or therapeutic. The result was that one would want to instinctively vomit it out of their mouth rather than swallow it so this parallel by Jesus would be easily understood by the people at this church. ④

Remember Paul's letter to the Colossians? In Col. 4:16 Paul tells them to have this letter read in Laodicea as well so they'd have had access to these words – cf. 3:1-17. Instead of heeding the words of God and growing spiritually over the next 40 years or so, they had degraded to become a social club with no redeeming qualities in the church. Even if they'd have been a cold church, Christ could have worked with that – in fact, it is likely more easy to convert a cold person towards the gospel than one who is lukewarm and feels they are OK. Their passionless “worship” is in no way ever going to be acceptable to God, and yet, in today's society in North America, the most common form of worship is passionless & uncommitted, just as described here in this passage.

Of course, the opposite of cold is hot and that, in a spiritual sense refers to fervency – exemplified by one whose life is given over serving Christ; loving God's word; loving the church; praying; loving others; being a testimony to the world; etc. The worship of these people is obviously acceptable to God.

So who are the 'lukewarm'? Professing believers who are not saved for the most part. Perhaps those who have walked an aisle, signed a card, come to church to keep up appearances, say the right things in public ( at least around other believers ), never put themselves out for others, never open their bibles, never pray in private, never give God

a thought unless they are in trouble...they are putting on an act and Christ is not fooled – these are the toughest people in the world to convert, because they believe they are already saved.

### III. Their True Condition v. 17

“For you say”...“For” means an explanation is coming, with the weight of “because”, so here is why they are lukewarm. They are self-deceived. They lived in a prosperous city, things were going well for them, there is no mention of persecution ( what would there be to persecute? ), and they felt self-sufficient – remember they had rebuilt after the earthquake in AD 60 on their own.

The contrast in this verse shows what they were trusting in, what their ‘idol’ was – “I am rich, I am prospering, I need nothing.” They were living in the physical, not the spiritual – all that mattered to them was their wealth & the security that brought them. Church had become a social gathering, a means to appear moral. It made them feel like ‘good people’, and they even thought that their temporal blessings were a mirror of their spiritual condition. This is the same error of so many in today’s Christianity.

Here is Jesus’ assessment of their condition, the only assessment that really matters. They were wretched, pitiable, poor, blind & naked. They did not see their need for the true Christ so they were not counting on Him to provide their sufficiency for life. They were on the broad road leading to destruction ( Matt. 7:13-14 ) & had built their ‘house’ “on the sand ( Matt. 7:24-27 ).

They were spiritually bankrupt, spiritually blind, and without the garments of the redeemed – naked ( Matt. 22:11-13 ). By all appearances, their condition was utterly hopeless, however, they had drawn the attention of the only One who could make a difference in their lives, Jesus Christ.

### IV. The Offer of Salvation vv. 18-19

Even though this church seemed completely out of touch spiritually and made Christ sick enough to vomit, His grace still extended to them. He did not abandon them, but instead counsels them on how to make what was wrong, right.

He offers them 3 things which they can “buy” from Him:

- Gold refined in the fire so they can be rich in reality
- White garments to clothe themselves and to hide the shame of their nakedness
- Salve to anoint their eyes so they’ll see.

All 3 of these things have a parallel to their local economic situation.

He has just told them that they are poor, so how can they buy ( spiritually ) these things He offers them, which they do need? Note **Isa. 55:1-7**. Notice “without money & without price”. If you have no money, and you are poor, then what do they have as currency to purchase these things? Well, what do you have to give when Jesus calls you to be saved? Your sin, your wretchedness. Augustus Toplady put it this way, “*Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy Cross I cling. Foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me Savior or I die*”. You exchange your repentance for what is of eternal value – “you give all that you are

for all that He is”<sup>ii</sup>. Once we see that we possess nothing of value apart from Christ, only then can we see that He is all we need.

Randy Alcorn comments, *“Unless we come to grips with the fact that we are precisely the same stock as Dodd and Stalin and Mao, we’ll never get over thinking that we deserve better. Evil done to us will offend us, and having to suffer will outrage us. We’ll never appreciate Christ’s grace so long as we hold on to the proud illusion that we’re better than we are.”*<sup>iii</sup>

We must build our lives on the sure foundation, the strong rock of Christ, rather than labouring in vain to build it on the sand ( Ps. 127:1 ). The gold is the treasure of heaven – the seeking of His kingdom above all else, hating the world – true faith – I Pet. 1:7; I Tim. 3:16; James 2:5. The garments of white are those garments given to by God to clothe us ( cf. Adam & Eve – Gen. 3:21; Isa.61:10; Rev. 3:4 ). The eye salve is the opening of blinded spiritual eyes so we can see Christ for who He is and recognize He is all we need!

In v. 19, Jesus is talking to perhaps a few believers ( a remnant ) and some potential believers when He says, *“those whom I love I reprove and discipline”*. He loves them enough to warn them of punishment to come – TGWTJ<sup>iv</sup> – so they need to repent and be zealous or risk meeting Him as wrathful judge. In the context of this passage, the discipline is not always that meted out to believers ( Heb. 12:5-11 ) but is rather a reminder of the condemnation that faces those who refuse to repent. Notice JN 3:16-18 – God’s love, eternal life, salvation & whoever does not believe ( and repentance is proof of belief ) is already condemned.

The call to salvation always includes the need to repent. You cannot be saved unless you repent – Acts 11:18; Acts 20:21; James 4:6-10; etc. Genuine repentance is a condition of salvation. It signifies that you comprehend your tremendous guilt in God’s sight. Although you realize He is love and does love you, you deserve His judgment and His full wrath. Your destiny is Hell unless you change the road you are on and you cannot make that change without Christ.

## V. Christ Knocking on the Door of the Church vv. 20-22

There are 2 famous paintings - one by an artist named “Tobie” of Jesus standing at a door in a garden, holding a shepherd’s staff and knocking at the door of what appears to be a house, and a similar one by Holman Hunt<sup>v</sup> depicts Christ with a lantern knocking on a door as well. In the paintings, there is no knob on the door so it must be opened from the inside. These paintings, representing this verse, have been used for decades to offer the message that “Jesus is knocking at the door of your heart...won’t you let Him come in?” It has been used traditionally as an evangelistic verse, and I guess that’s OK, but that is not the Biblical message of this verse.

Here is a church whose works are mediocre or lukewarm. The people have become self-sufficient and have shut Jesus out of their fellowship in much the same way as Ezekiel depicts God’s presence & glory leaving the Temple, and the body of Israel is so self-infatuated that they don’t even realize God has left them. In this verse, Jesus is knocking at the door of the church and His purpose for knocking is made plain. *“If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to eat with Him and he with Me.”* Eating is referring to fellowship – to an intimate relationship this “church” was

missing out on. They are settling for worldly scraps of joy when true joy is ready to come into their midst. Is there even one who will recognize He is missing and open the door to let Him in?

If one will open the door and dine with Christ, that one can be a conqueror, and overcomer, a Christian who follows Christ. Not only will true believers dine with Him at the marriage supper of the Lamb, but they will sit with Him on His throne. Throw away your trust in your wealth, your fashionable clothes, all your worldly idols and come to Christ. He alone can take us from being poor, wretched, naked and blind and promise us a seat of influence in His Kingdom.

Apathy won't achieve it; careless worship will not suffice; wavering over doctrine will not accomplish it. Only overcoming the world, the flesh & the devil by the power of God will qualify us for the promise. Jesus Christ stands ready to supply all we need to accomplish true worship through our faith in Him.

He ends the letter on the ( by now ) very familiar formula that challenges us to heed the message. *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches."*

All 7 churches are represented in our post-modern, post-Christian times aren't they? There are good churches like Smyrna & Philadelphia; cold churches like Ephesus where doctrine is correct & strong, but the key element of love is missing; churches like Pergamum where sin is tolerated in the church; like Thyatira who compromise with the world ( Ecumenical ); like Sardis where only a faithful remnant remains within a dead church; and there are apostate churches...churches in name only like Laodicea who have become social clubs.

In every case, Jesus has a message – of commendation, of rebuke and warning, an offer to repent and be saved, a challenge to hear and to act. These letters to the 7 churches, far from being a prelude only to the sweeping scenes of heavenly glory and cataclysmic judgment, are the true heart of the message of the Book of Revelation, forcing us to examine our own hearts and to see how we fit into the picture of redemption within our own church body, knowing that Jesus hold all churches firmly in His sovereign and loving grasp.

Steve Camp captured the parallel between this church at Laodicea and our own modern church with a song he wrote in 1983. The lyrics are below.

### Living in Laodicea

Oh Lord, take your plow to my fallow ground  
 Let your blade dig down to the soil of my soul  
 For I've become dry & dusty, Lord I know there must be  
 Richer earth lying below.

For I've been living in Laodicea  
 And the fire that once burned bright, I've let it grow dim  
 And the very Word I swore that I would die for all has been forgotten  
 As the world's become my friend.

We have turned from your law to find a better way

Each man does what is right in his own eyes  
 We will pay the price for our sinning  
 We can never know true living, we've exchanged His truth for lies

For I've been living in Laodicea  
 And the fire that once burned bright, I've let it grow dim  
 And the very Word I swore that I would die for all has been forgotten  
 As the world's become my friend.

It is no small thing that He's done for you  
 By shutting the gates of Hell upon the cross  
 We were sentenced once but now we are pardoned  
 And He chooses to use us though we fall

So while we're living in Laodicea  
 Keep the fire burning bright, don't let it grow dim  
 For the very Word we swore that we would die for, it must not be forgotten  
 Fear the world become a friend

For the very Word we swore that we would die for, it must not be forgotten  
 Fear the world become a friend<sup>vi</sup>

## Next lesson – The Rapture of the Church

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<sup>i</sup> John MacArthur; from his sermon # 66-14 on Rev. 3:14-18; Laodicea, the Lukewarm Church.

<sup>ii</sup> Steve Camp; from song, "The Gospel According to Jesus".

<sup>iii</sup> Randy Alcorn; "If God is Good"; Multnomah; 2009; pg. 76.

<sup>iv</sup> The Great White Throne Judgment

<sup>v</sup> A similar painting by Holman Hunt depicts Jesus standing with a lamp at a door – the original hangs in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England.

<sup>vi</sup> Steve Camp, 1983 Birdwing Music; Cherry Lane Music Publishing Co. Inc. ( ASCAP )