

Revelation 3:14-22 Laodicea

We come this morning to the last of the seven letters— Jesus letter to the church in Laodicea. Laodicea receives Jesus’ most blistering rebuke. Laodicea was an arrogant church that thought they had everything, but they made Jesus want to puke.

Archaeology and history offer us some interesting background to this letter. Laodicea was a wealthy city that served as a center of banking and finance for the Roman Empire. Her wealth came from a plentiful supply of gold, a thriving fashion industry, and a well-known hospital.

Like Philadelphia last week, Laodicea was also destroyed by an earthquake. The Roman government offered them loans to help rebuild, unlike Philadelphia, Laodicea said, “No, thank you. We’ve got this.” Imagine that happening today. A hurricane wipes out a city, but the city is so well off they tell the federal government, “We don’t need your help.” That was Laodicea.

The area around Laodicea was also famous for its glossy black wool, and so a thriving fashion industry built up around it. Laodicea’s fashion designers and clothiers were famous throughout the empire.

Laodicea also had a famous medical school that combined medical practice with idol worship in search of healing. This school was home to a couple of renowned eye doctors and their ointment that was said to heal all sorts of conditions.

Laodicea also had one monumental problem. It had no source of its own fresh water. It sat on the shores of a river thick with white mud and its water undrinkable. This was a problem that plagued all the nearby water sources, so Laodicea had to pipe in its water from miles away. Even this piped in water became so full of bitter minerals, that those unaccustomed to it wanted to hurl. All of these things help us understand what Jesus says to this lukewarm church.

14 Jesus’ introduces his letter as ***the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness.***

Amen is a Hebrew word that is used frequently in Bible. It appears nine times in Revelation, but many don’t know what it means. We think it signifies the end of a prayer. Some must think it means, “let’s eat.” Kind of like those who think the last line of the National Anthem is “Play ball,” or “Drivers, start your engines.”

Amen is simply a Hebrew expression of strong affirmation. It means “So be it,” “I agree with that,” or “It is true.” The simplest translation might be “YES!” This is the only place in the Bible it is used as a name or title, and it simply emphasizes the fact that Jesus is *faithful and true*.

Jesus also says he is ***the beginning of God’s creation***. This doesn’t mean that Jesus was created, as some cults allege. Other translations read “ruler” or “firstborn.” The Greek word used here means “origin, cause, source.” The idea is Jesus is the source of all Creation.

We know that God the Father was not alone in creation. In Genesis 1:26 God says, “*Let us make man in our image.*” Notice the plural pronouns there. Creation was an act of the triune God, and Jesus played a key role in it.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him (Colossians 1:15-16).

Jesus, as the faithful and true witness, is painting a courtroom scene. Today, when a witness is called to give testimony they are sworn to “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” This is Jesus swearing Himself into the court of heavenly judgment, and as the source of creation and as an expert witness, the testimony he brings against the Laodicea church is true.

15-16 For some of the churches, it brought comfort when Jesus said, ***I know your works***.

For Laodicea, though, it brings all the comfort of an IRS audit. When Jesus took a look at their books, he found their works ***are neither cold nor hot***.

This is an obvious nod to the local water supply. Laodiceans could look six miles away and see the famous hot springs of Hierapolis. Its white terraced pools of hot cascading water could easily be seen across the valley. This *hot* water was prized for its reputed healing qualities. Even today, many hot springs are popular for those seeking their therapeutic benefits.

Meanwhile, ten miles to the southeast sat Colossae with its fresh, *cold* water. It was pure, life-giving, and delicious. Both hot and cold water served their own good purpose. Laodicea, however, had only tepid, nauseating water. The church in Laodicea was likewise *neither cold nor hot*. They served no useful purpose.

This is why Jesus wishes they **would...be either cold or hot!** Don't see this in terms of hot = good, and cold = bad. I've even taught this text this way. We should either zealously follow Jesus or reject him completely. Jesus would rather us be against him than be "eh, whatever."

That's not what this means. Jesus presents hot and cold and equally desirable and positive alternatives to being lukewarm. John's readers in Laodicea would have instantly understood these words against the backdrop of the hot springs of Hierapolis, the cold water of Colossae, and their own lukewarm waters.

Jesus finds the situation in Laodicea nauseating. **So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.** We like things cold or hot, but not lukewarm. Cold lemonade. Cold milk. Iced Tea. Hot chocolate. Hot tea. Hot cider. A hot shower with a hot wife. What happens when we grab something and we expect it to be hot or cold, but instead it's lukewarm? We want to spit it out.

I remember a particularly humorous incident from my college days. My friends and I were gathered in my dorm room playing a rousing game of Risk. As we were focused on world domination, one of my friends reached back for his ice-cold drink. Instead, he grabbed a cup left from the previous day. After taking a huge gulp of the lukewarm drink, he spewed his entire mouthful all over my game.

Jesus' reaction to a lukewarm church is the same. He expects either the fire of passion or cold, refreshing living water, but not lukewarm apathy. Laodicea has so many resources at their disposal, but they are doing nothing with them.

These words of Jesus should give us pause for consideration. What church in history has had the resources and wealth of North American Christianity? What are we doing with them beyond building warehouses for our own edification, comfort, and entertainment? Kyle Idleman describes the problem:

My concern is that many of our churches in America have gone from being sanctuaries to becoming stadiums. And every week all the fans come to the stadium where they cheer for Jesus but have no interest in truly following him.¹

I served in city where the largest church in town cut its entire missions budget. The lead pastor declared they were their own mission; therefore they did not need to support other missions. Meanwhile, they expanded their already spacious facilities. I'm not saying a new building is a bad idea. I'm not suggesting that a state of the art sound system is a bad investment for the kingdom. There are churches that do both very well. However, we will have to answer for how we have used the resources we have been given. The bottom line is this— Provide hot healing water or cold living water, but do something.

17 Jesus emphasizes the difference between their ego and the reality. ***For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.*** There is self-confidence and positive self-esteem, but Laodicea displays a spiritual arrogance. Laodicea mistook their material wealth for God's blessing. Dennis Johnson suggests that Laodicea suffers from a case of "affluenza."ⁱⁱ It is the same error the so many churches in America make. We think our wealth is a sign of God's approval.

Heavenly accounting calculates a different bottom line. We count nickels and noses, but Jesus audits the heart, and by his calculations, the church in Laodicea is ***wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*** These are not just random insults Jesus is throwing at them. They are dripping with sarcasm as Jesus takes the reputation and economy of their church and city and throws it in their face. You think you're so glamorous, but you are wretched and pitiable. Your city is so wealthy and your church has huge bank accounts, but you are poor. You offer high fashion to the whole empire all the while you are naked.ⁱⁱⁱ

Not only can we confuse our earthly condition for our spiritual condition, we use one to mask the other. A Christian lady was taken in by a series of books with their lurid, twisted sexuality. Not wanting to look like she was reading mommy porn, she slipped the book inside a Francine Rivers dust jacket. Now she looked like she was reading wholesome Christian fiction. Our facades may not always be that obvious, but disguise our weakness just the same. We put on all the trappings of success when we are haunted by failure. We look the part of a happy Christian at church on Sunday when things are falling apart. We arrange our worldliness to look godly. We fool others, and we may even fool ourselves, but we never fool our Savior.

18 As sharp as Jesus' rebuke is, all hope is not lost. Jesus offers grace. He offers them true riches. ***I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich.***

Gold, when it is mined from the ground is corrupted with all sorts of other minerals. To get pure gold you must refine it by melting it at high temperature. The impurities then separate from the gold and can be removed leaving only pure gold.

Jesus is not offering them earthly riches or investment advice. Laodicea's physical wealth has disguised their spiritual poverty. Instead, he is offering them the true spiritual treasure of being made in the image of Christ.

The refiner's fire is a common symbol in the Old Testament that speaks of how God uses tests and trials to purify his people.^{iv} Through Zechariah, God speaks of a day in which he will refine a remnant of his people *"as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call upon my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The LORD is my God (Zech. 13:9)."*

Jesus is drawing upon that imagery to let Laodicea know that if they repent, they can be restored and renewed and be his people.

Jesus then switches metaphors and counsels them to buy ***white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen.*** The irony is these most well-dressed of believers actually need a new wardrobe. Jesus does not want to clothe them in the famous black wool of Laodicea, but in *white garments* which we're told in Revelation 19:8 symbolize *"the righteous deeds of the saints."*

We've talked about how in Revelation clothing represents conduct that becomes character.^v Laodicea's problem isn't just that their clothing is stained like we saw in Sardis (3:4), they're walking around buck naked. The emperor has no clothes. They don't need to do laundry. They need a whole new wardrobe of the righteousness of Christ.

Thirdly, Jesus tells them they need ***salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.*** People travelled to Laodicea from all over the empire seeking their famous healing ointment for the eyes. Rumor had it that this salve could even cure blindness. It used ingredients mined from local mines that to this day are valued for their medicinal qualities.

This church is spiritually blind, but their blindness is a willful blindness. They choose not to see, because they prefer living in their own spiritual fantasy.

19 Jesus is not speaking out of anger or wrath. He is motivated entirely by love. ***Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.*** Jesus loves his church enough to not sit idly by while we destroy ourselves. Like a loving parent who corrects and disciplines his child, so Jesus corrects and disciplines his church. Please hear the mercy in our Lord's words.

This is a call to action. They are to be zealous in their repentance. Such repentance is not a small change in behavior or minor course correction. To be zealous is to give wholehearted devotion to a thing. Jesus is offering them grace and restoration, but they must pursue it with everything they have. There is no cheap grace here. Some of you are in a similar place this morning. Jesus has only love for you. He offers his grace and mercy, but it is time to pursue him with everything you have. Half measures won't work.

20 This is personal for Jesus. ***Behold, I stand at the door and knock.*** He loves his church, and he personally makes his desire known. Jesus doesn't want to be the uninvited guest at his own church, so he calls out even as he knocks. ***If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.*** This is a heartfelt appeal from their Lord and Savior, "please let me in." Jesus loves his church like a groom loves his bride (19:6-9). Jesus calling out to his beloved. He desires companionship and intimacy with her.

Jesus' promise here looks forward to what Revelation 19 calls the marriage supper of the Lamb. The consummation of a new marriage was celebrated with a marriage feast. Jesus uses this marriage feast to symbolize his eternal union with his church when he returns. Jesus wants to share that union, not just with the church universal, but with each congregation. With you.

Jesus is not the big, bad wolf. He won't blow the door in. He won't kick it in. He won't force his way. We must invite him. Hear the heartache and tragedy of this plea. Sometimes we hear this verse at invitation time when we invite non-Christians to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The problem is that this isn't Jesus knocking on the door of a lost person's heart. This is Jesus asking to be let in to his own church. These are people who are already Christian.

This isn't Jesus knocking on the door of your heart. He's knocking on the front door of the church, saying, "Let me in. Quit trying to have church without me." This was a church that kept getting together, locking the door, and shutting Jesus out. They had kicked Jesus out of his own church. Jesus shows up and he beats on the door and says, "Hey, I'd like to go to church. I like church. I'm for church. Let me in. This is my church. I love her. I died for her. I'm the head of the church. I'm coming again to save her. Can I come in? She is my bride, can I please see her."

And what is the response of the church? "Please, come in. We've messed it up so much without you." Or is it, "No. We've got it all figured out and you're going to ruin it. We've got a good thing going here, and if we let Jesus in here, he'll just mess it up." How many churches, if Jesus showed up, wouldn't let him in?"

Verse 21 contains a promise for ***the one who conquers***. Jesus promises, ***I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.***

Scripture teaches that after Jesus ascended into heaven following his resurrection he sat at the right hand of the Father on his throne and that is where he currently reigns (Matt. 26:44; Ac. 2:33; 5:31; 7:55; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3-4; 8:1; 10:12; 1 Pet. 3:22).

To sit at someone's right hand is to share in their honor, power, and authority. Hebrews 12:2 implies the reason that Christ endured the cross and all the suffering that went with it was to share the joy of his position at the right hand of the father with you. It says that Jesus, *"who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."*

The joy Jesus pursued cannot just be the joy of sitting with the Father himself. He already had that joy. That's where he was before he came to the earth. He could have stayed there. He could have enjoyed that glory forever. But there was something he could get only by coming and dying— something he thought worth dying for, something that would bring him indescribably joy and that his sharing his throne, his authority, and his glory with you.

ⁱ Idleman, Kyle (2010) Not a Fan Updated & Expanded. Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan. p. 8

ⁱⁱ Johnson, Dennis J. (2001) Triumph of the Lamb. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing. p. 91

ⁱⁱⁱ Hemer, Colin J. (2001) The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans. p. 191-198

^{iv} See also Ezekiel 22:18-22; Malachi 3:1-18; Job 23:10 Psalm 66:10-12;

^v See comments on 3:4-5