

## Message to Laodicea: Repent of Self-Sufficiency

Revelation 3:14-22

We have covered a lot of territory in this series. In closing let's review where we've been. Jesus Christ, the Creator and sovereign King, dictated seven letters to the pastors of seven churches who were to read these letters to the congregations. We have noted that each of these letters finds Christ addressing dangers that Christians have faced for centuries.

At Ephesus there was the danger of diminishing love. At Smyrna, the danger of fearing suffering. In Pergamum there was the danger of doctrinal compromise. In Thyatira we saw the danger of moral compromise. Sardis was a congregation of spiritual deadness. Last week the letter to Philadelphia expressed the danger of failing to advance. Tonight, we will see in Laodicea the danger of indifference.

The city of Laodicea had a unique history. Many of the residents were Jews, and very early in the Christian era it became a very important center for Christianity. Laodicea had flourished under the dynasty of emperors ruling in John's day. Laodicea was an important, prosperous, and wealthy city known for its medical schools, flourishing banking as well as its medical and textile industries. It was the capital of the "Cibryatic Convention," a consortium of twenty-five townships. As with the other Roman cities, it had its temples and patron gods such as Apollo, Asclepius, Hades, Hera, and Zeus. The city hosted gladiatorial games and boasted a theater. So arrogant was Laodicea about its wealth that when the emperor proposed to help rebuild Laodicea along with other Asian cities destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60, Laodicea refused the funds. Smyrna and Laodicea, the two churches most wealthy and comfortable, were the churches most rebuked of the seven churches.

Laodicea boasted great resources, but while the Laodicean Christians likely shared their Laodicean neighbors' pride over their self-sufficiency in many respects, they presumably also shared a common dislike for their water supply (Rev 3:15–16). Laodicea's water was full of sediment. The terra cotta pipes of Laodicea's water tower were full of thick lime deposits; likewise, lime deposits on the waterfall cliff just opposite Laodicea provided a constant visible reminder of their water problems. Laodicea lacked its own water supply, having no direct access to the cold water of the mountains or the hot water of the nearby springs in Hierapolis to the north. In contrast to its claims to self-sufficiency, it had to pipe in its water from the south; though much of the aqueduct from the south was underground, nearer the city it came through stone barrel pipes, thus remaining vulnerable to any intended besiegers who wished to cut off the city's water supply. More important for this passage, any water piped into Laodicea had grown lukewarm by the time of its arrival.

### RD PASSAGE

Like the previous letters, Jesus Christ identifies himself to the church in verse 14. In the Old Testament God is literally, "the God of the Amen" ("the God of truth," Isa. 65:16), who is completely trustworthy and truthful. Additionally, Christ is the faithful and true witness. He is the One who keeps His word. He is the originator, the creator of God's creation. The Gospel of John says of Him, "All things were created through him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created" (John 1:3). Creation indelibly bears His mark upon it. Paul informs us that, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For everything was created by him, in heaven and

on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and by him all things hold together” (Col. 1:15-17). Jesus was not created by God but is the source and origin of all creation. He is the moving force of all creation and by Him everything consists or holds together.

### **Tragic Indifference** (Rev. 3:15-16)

Jesus declared; “You are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am going to vomit you out of my mouth.”

Laodicea was near two other cities. Hierapolis had hot medicinal waters; Colossae had cold, pure, refreshing water. Both waters were wonderful. The word lukewarm (*chliaros*) appears only here in the New Testament it comes from the word *chlio* “to become warm.” The sense of “unusable” or “barren” gives a fuller understanding of the word. Jesus said he will vomit out the church because it was nauseating to him. It was lukewarm, barren, unusable. What created this condition? There is only one answer. It is compromise. When you want to make something lukewarm you mix together hot and cold – you compromise both properties.

It becomes apparent that a lukewarm person is more concerned about his own comfort and preferences than about worshiping God. He is completely self-centered, self-occupied, self-satisfied, self-sufficient, self-absorbed, and self-confident. Simply put, these lukewarm folks completely compromised the things of God.

As a general rule these believers did not deny the gospel. They knew that sinners were lost, they just made no attempt to lead them to Christ. The cross was not denied, it was just ignored. The condition was intolerable. Such was the nauseating indifference that characterized the church at Laodicea as the Lord He resolved to vomit them out of His mouth. Christ’s threat to “vomit,” means that he will judge and reject them for their self-righteousness or self-sufficiency rather than for their lack of spiritual fervor.

### **Deluded Independence** (Rev. 3:17)

The symptoms of their barrenness are specified in verse 17. Each church is the Lord's church and the Laodiceans forgot that truth. The Lord Jesus Christ sketches three parallel pictures of the church of Laodicea’s life.

First, the church said, I am rich. The church supposed it had such adequate material resources that it could do without the Lord’s spiritual help. The congregation was like the city, proud of its banks and affluence, boasting that I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing. This is the opposite of the church in Smyrna, which knew of its material poverty. Christ calls the Laodicean church poor.

The most dangerous place for any church or believer is when they think they have it all and don’t need anything else. The real question is not whether the church can survive persecution. It is estimated that there are now more believers in China than in America, and they live under severe persecution. The church can survive persecution; it is uncertain if it can survive prosperity.

Second, the church thought it was clothed with plenty of righteous character. The imagery is drawn from what we know of Laodicea, renowned for its extensive textile industry, particularly of black wool

fabric. Instead, the Lord understood that it was spiritually wretched, pitiful, and naked. This is a graphic picture of the difference between what a church thinks of itself and what the Lord knows the condition to be.

The word naked described a church lacking in the covering of the glory and majesty of God. It speaks of a church whose very character was exposed before God and the world. Here was a church that possessed none of the covering the bride of Christ should possess and no ability to be the witness for Christ it was established to be. Other churches had “white clothes” (Rev. 3:4-5). This church had nothing.

Third, the church supposed itself to have spiritual insight. Instead, it was blind. The city of Laodicea was famous for its medical school that exported a powder used for eye salve. Such medicine could not salve their blind eyes. The word blind could be translated “nearsighted.” It describes those who have no vision and no discernment. This church was clueless of its true condition. Laodicea was famous for the development of eye salves from the mineral waters. Its development of ocular treatments was far ahead of any other city in the ancient world. Yet spiritually, they had no vision.

Even sadder than these deficiencies is Christ’s declaration that they didn’t realize it. This church had deceived itself about its spiritual condition. Because they had depended on themselves, they were impoverished, unclothed, and sightless. Christ rejects whatever a church is or does that is prompted by self-righteousness.

#### **Genuine Wealth (Rev. 3:18-19)**

All is not yet lost for this congregation. Christ cares for its members. His command has a biting irony: I advise you to buy from me things that you do not think you need. Of course, the metaphor to buy does not mean that spiritual benefits may be earned or purchased. Christ by his grace supplies them freely.

Jesus told them to secure from Him gold refined in the fire. Refined gold is subjected to extreme heat so that all the impurities can be removed. The impurities rise to the top in the heat and what remains is the purest gold. This spiritual gold can only be received from the Lord Himself. The price of the gold is not mentioned, but surely it involved the refinement which comes through repentance, faith, and submission to the Lord. This is not speaking of purchasing salvation, as that was accomplished by Christ’s death on the cross.

Eternal riches cannot be purchased with a bank account. Isaiah said, “Come, everyone who is thirsty, come to the water; and you without silver, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without silver and without cost” (Isa. 55:1). If a church confesses its poverty, the riches of God are at its disposal. We do not buy from God through our goodness, determination, or with anything we have. God desires the confession of our poverty and need.

What a shock their nakedness must have been to this church. Laodicea was famous for the clothing available there. The black sheep on the hillsides around Laodicea provided a plush wool that was sought after from all over the world. This self-sufficient congregation was unaware of its embarrassing nakedness. The only way to have garments is through the provision of Christ, symbolized here as covering their shameful nakedness (that is their lack of righteousness). The

symbolism repeats the previous provision of “refined gold” and stands in somewhat ironic contrast to the homespun black woolen clothing they wore so proudly.

If we are conscious of our blindness, God has a cure and supplies spiritual illumination and understanding. This church that resided in a city known for its vision was informed that it was actually blind. They needed to come to the Lord and buy divine salve for their blindness if they wished to see.

Salve to put on your eyes recalls the miracle of Jesus in which he applied a salve of saliva mixed with dirt in healing the man born blind (John 9:1–12). On that occasion he told his accusers, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains” (John 9:41). The Laodicean church claimed that it had spiritual insight. Would it recognize its blindness and ask for Christ’s wisdom and insight (Col. 1:9)?

The Lord’s criticism is based on his love. Surprisingly, the Greek verb here is a form of *phileō* (“to have tender affection”) rather than *agapaō* (“to value unconditionally,” see Rev. 2:19). His declaration of love is balanced by a severe expectation of rebuke and discipline. Proverbs 3:12 is perhaps the basis for this: “The LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.”

### **Gracious Invitation** (Rev. 3:20-21)

Christ not only wants to provide gold, clothing, and sight to this congregation; he wants them to enjoy his person, his fellowship. His plea, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock,” is poignant and urgent. The verb form for knock suggests insistent, repeated pounding. Although he wants the entire congregation to open the door to fellowship with him, the individual is ultimately the one who must decide.

Listen to Warren Weirsbe, “Note that when we invite Him in, the supper room becomes a throne room! It is through communion with Christ that we find victory and become overcomers indeed.” Christ knows that some will respond. As with each of the six earlier letters, the one who overcomes or has an ear or hears what the Spirit says to the churches is promised great reward. This is the first time Revelation mentions Christ’s exaltation in the language of sitting with my Father on his throne, although chapter 5, develops this portrait extensively. It is also the only place in Revelation in which Jesus is identified with his people as a fellow “overcomer.” Christ’s conquest of sin at his first coming is in view.

Jesus promised that if we open ourselves to Him, He will enter our lives and fellowship with us. This promise is given to believers with wholehearted devotion to the Lord, and it exceeds all the other promises found in these seven letters. The throne represents the very power and authority of God. It is offered to every believer, even the lukewarm believers in Laodicea. This brings us back to Revelation 1:6 where the Lord said that He has “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father—to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Later in Revelation, his ultimate conquest of God’s enemies is described: “They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers” (17:14). The overcoming Christ and his overcoming people are thus linked in both passages. These people will sit with me on my throne, another symbol of the rule and reign of God’s people throughout eternity. (We are not meant to

suppose a literal throne so large that millions will be able to sit down on it simultaneously.) This promise is quite parallel to the one given to the “overcomers” of Thyatira (2:26).

Verse 22 closes vision one of Revelation. The words repeat the formula found at the end of the previous six letters, but they are a fitting conclusion to the entire opening vision. The same Jesus who, during his earthly ministry, commanded persons with ears to hear (Matt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35), now during his heavenly ministry commands his churches to pay attention. He who has an ear, let him hear reminds us that he does not force us to heed his words. Since the words of the risen Lord to John on Patmos are indeed what the Spirit says to the churches, then we neglect them to our peril.