

## “To the Church in Laodicea”

### *Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 9*

*Texts: Revelation 3:14-22; Hosea 12:1-14*

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**T**he church in Laodicea thinks of itself as wealthy, very well-off, and without any apparent needs. But the reality is far different. While this congregation may have an exalted opinion of itself, Jesus describes this church in completely different terms: wretched, pitiful, poor and naked. This church is lukewarm and is about to be spit out of Christ’s mouth. With these words of rebuke, the church in Laodicea joins the church in Sardis as the only two congregations among the seven addressed by our Lord which receive no word of praise. Instead, these two churches receive only a word of rebuke and a command to repent, lest they face Christ’s judgment.

As we continue our series on the Book of Revelation, we come to the seventh and final letter addressed by Jesus Christ to his churches in Asia Minor, the letter to the church in Laodicea. With this particular letter we come to the end of John’s opening vision of the resurrected Christ which began in Revelation 1:12 and which ends in chapter three with Jesus’ words of encouragement, admonition and rebuke to those congregations struggling to remain faithful in the face of paganism, persecution from the state, as well as from those Jews who lived in significant numbers in several of these cities. Lord willing, we’ll soon turn our attention to John’s second vision, the vision of God’s throne room in Revelation 4 and 5 and the worship which takes place in heaven.

**B**ut as we wrap up this section of Revelation, we turn our focus to Christ’s letter to the church in Laodicea, a city located some forty-miles south of Philadelphia and some one hundred miles or so to the east of Ephesus. Once again, knowing something about the background of this particular city is very helpful in understanding some of the things that Jesus says to this congregation.

Established well before the rise of the Roman Empire, the city of Laodicea was historically known as the city of Zeus. About 250 B.C., the city was renamed by the Syrian ruler Antiochus II in honor of his wife, Laodice. When the Romans entered the area one hundred years later, Laodicea became an important crossroad and the seat of local government. In addition to being an important and thriving center of commerce, Laodicea was also widely known for its black wool and for its medical school which produced an effective eye-salve which was in wide demand throughout the Roman world as one of the few effective treatments for a number of eye ailments. Although hit hard by the same earthquake which had decimated the city of Philadelphia in A.D. 17, Laodicea received limited financial aid from the Roman government. This was because the city was wealthy enough to meet its own needs while still being able to contribute substantial sums to help several neighboring cities rebuild.<sup>1</sup>

After the Jewish captivity in Babylon had ended and large numbers of Jews sought to return to their ancient homeland, Antiochus the Great enticed nearly 2000 Jewish families to relocate to this area in Western Asia Minor about 250 B.C. Given the fact that there is no mention of opposition from the Jews living in the area to the church in Laodicea, coupled with the fact that there is no mention of opposition from Gentiles in the form of persecution from the state, nor is there any mention of problems associated with false teachers being in their midst, we can but wonder if the church in Laodicea had stopped

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<sup>1</sup> Kistemaker, Revelation, 166-167.

preaching the gospel altogether. The fact that this church actually thrived in an area dominated by Jews and paganism—the city was home to a huge temple dedicated to the worship of Caesar—is a good indication that this congregation had long since stopped being a threat, or an offense to those outside the church.<sup>2</sup>

Given the reference to its material wealth and prosperity it is very likely that this church had grown complacent, self-satisfied, and self-reliant.<sup>3</sup> By worldly standards, this church was a huge success. It is probably well-attended and had lots of money. By Christ’s standards, however, this church is absolutely poor and wretched. It has lost interest in the gospel and in Christ. This church thinks it has everything it needs without them—therefore, it has nothing.

One more bit of background about the city of Laodicea needs to be mentioned before we turn to the text of the letter itself. The city had no local water supply. The Lycus river which ran through the city was described as “turbid with white mud . . . nauseous and undrinkable.” The neighboring city of Colossae to the east was watered by a cold mountain stream. Hierapolis, to the north, sat on a natural hot spring which was believed to have medicinal qualities. But Laodicea obtained its water through an aqueduct running from a hot spring located five miles to the south. The water was scalding hot when it entered the aqueduct. But it was filled with calcium carbonate and by the time the water traveled five miles down the system and arrived in the city, it was lukewarm and barely drinkable.<sup>4</sup> It is a matter of record that throughout its early history, Laodicea’s growth and prosperity was hindered by its lack of drinking water, a situation with which every one of Laodicea’s residents would have been familiar.

**A**nd so with this bit of historical background in mind, we now turn to Christ’s letter to the church in Laodicea, where we find a very familiar pattern.

As we have seen in each of these seven letters, in verse 14, Jesus instructs “*the angel of the church in Laodicea [to] write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation.*” This directive makes it clear that Jesus who is Lord of his church, possesses full authority over his individual congregations, and therefore when he speaks to his churches, he does so in this capacity. It is also quite significant that Jesus speaks of himself here as “the Amen,” and “the faithful and true witness,” especially when the congregation to whom he is writing has such a false estimation of their own standing before God. Each of these terms overlaps a bit with the others and together they serve to remind the hearer that Jesus is God’s word of “amen,” the faithful witness, that one who alone testifies about the true condition of things on earth before his father in heaven. The point we should note is that even as Jesus was a faithful witness to Israel when testifying about his father during his earthly ministry, so now, after his resurrection from the dead, Jesus is a faithful witness to his heavenly father when testifying about the condition of this church.<sup>5</sup> He sees what the Laodiceans do not.

In the NIV, Jesus is also said to speak of himself as “the ruler of God’s creation,” but this is probably not

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<sup>2</sup> Kistemaker, Revelation, 167,

<sup>3</sup> Poythress, The Returning King, 92-93.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, The Triumph of the Lamb, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Beale, Revelation, 296.

the best translation of the original language. A better translation is something like, “the beginning of God’s creation,” a phrase which should be seen in the light of the earlier declaration in Revelation 1:5, in which Jesus is declared to be the “firstborn” from the dead.<sup>6</sup> The idea is simply this—in Christ’s resurrection from the dead, the new creation has already begun. Through Christ’s conquest of the grave, even now God is removing the curse by breaking the power of sin and death through Christ’s sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection. To a church such as that in Laodicea—which trusts in itself, its money and its success—Jesus is confronting them with the truth that he alone can bring true spiritual renewal—“the new creation.” He alone can undo the effects of sin. He alone will raise the dead. The Laodiceans must therefore look to him, in whom creation is renewed, rather than rely on temporal and worldly things as they have been doing.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, Jesus reminds this particular congregation that as the faithful witness he knows their true condition. *“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!”* Anyone living in Laodicea and who was familiar with the lukewarm and tepid water which came through the cities’ aqueduct would have immediately grasped what Jesus was saying. Jesus knows the true state of affairs of this church. The Laodiceans may think of themselves as wealthy and without need—these, by the way, are the same sentiments echoed by the Harlot in Revelation 18, who has enriched the world’s merchants with her wealth, all the while seducing them into unbelief. In reality, this church is just like the tepid and bitter water the people of Laodicea were forced to drink on a daily basis.

And this, of course, explains why Jesus warns this church about its lukewarm condition, as well as why he so pointedly tells them that it would be better if they were either hot or cold. If the church becomes cold, it will see the gospel as a kind of refreshing spring like that which watered the city of Colossae to the east. If the church becomes hot, it will see the gospel as having medicinal value like the springs of Hierapolis to the north. To remain lukewarm then, is a metaphor for continuing to compromise with the spirit of the age in order to attain material success, rather than seeking to please God by remaining faithful to the gospel, which is to be hot or cold.

If you’ve ever tried to drink flat Alka-Seltzer or room temperature “Bud Lite,” you know exactly what Jesus is talking about. This is why he goes on to say in verse 16, *“So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”* The complacency toward the things of God and the interest shown in things of this world has rendered this church nothing but a bitter and disgusting taste in our Lord’s mouth. And so, unless this church repents, the Lord will spit them from his mouth. How can such a congregation be an effective witness to those around them? They cannot. They have compromised to the point that they no longer offend anyone and in the process, sadly, have become an offense to the Lord of the church. They may be a success in the world’s eyes, but they are a failure in Christ’s estimation.

Completely self-deceived and utterly complacent—perhaps even the adjective “lazy” applies—because of their wealth and success, Jesus describes this congregation’s self-assessment before pointing out to them the very stark reality of their situation: *“You 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.”* From this

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<sup>6</sup> See the discussion of this in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 297 ff.

<sup>7</sup> See the discussions in Johnson, Beale and Poytress about Christ’s connection to the renewal of all things as implied by this assertion.

description of their true condition, it is clear that because of their success in terms of their wealth and prosperity, this church thinks that it has no needs. Its members have equated material blessing with God's favor. And since they have acquired great wealth and have no apparent material need, they mistakenly assume that they are pleasing God by their conduct.

This assertion by our Lord about thinking of themselves as rich when the reality is that they are poor, is based upon some very loud echoes from the Old Testament, especially from those passages where Israel had come to believe that the nation's economic prosperity was supposedly evidence of its healthy spiritual condition. There are a number of instances in the Old Testament where the Jews mistakenly assumed that material prosperity was proof that the nation had been faithful to the covenant, even though material prosperity was seen at the time as a human accomplishment instead of a great blessing from God. The reality was far different from the appearance for Israel even as it is for the church in Laodicea.

Once such place where this same idea can be found is Hosea 12, our Old Testament lesson, where Ephraim had become overly confident because of Israel's wealth. According to Hosea's prophecy, we read that "*Ephraim*" who is Manasseh's brother, but in Hosea's prophecy, is symbolic of the nation of Israel as a whole, "*feeds on the wind; he pursues the east wind all day and multiplies lies and violence. He makes a treaty with Assyria and sends olive oil to Egypt. The LORD has a charge to bring against Judah; he will punish Jacob according to his ways and repay him according to his deeds. In the womb he grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there—the LORD God Almighty, the LORD is his name of renown! But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always. The merchant uses dishonest scales; he loves to defraud.*"

And just like the church in Laodicea, "*Ephraim boasts, 'I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin.' . . . But Ephraim has bitterly provoked him to anger; his Lord will leave upon him the guilt of his bloodshed and will repay him for his contempt.*" As Israel [Ephraim] had become a merchant with no problems with dishonest gain while defrauding her neighbors for the sake of earning a greater profit, so too, the church in Laodicea boasts of its wealth, thinking that its money will cover up its sins. Jesus, however, now exposes the truth. This church is not rich and without need. In fact, it is "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." What is worse, is the fact that the members of this church have not the slightest clue as to their true condition. These people have compromised with the spirit of the age to the point where they are blind to their true condition. Yes, in the eyes of the world, they have prospered greatly. But the economic gains and well-being this compromise has produced obscures the fact that what was lost in the process is the real treasure—the gospel! And not having the gospel means that in Christ's eyes, this church has nothing. It is wretched.

It is with this deplorable condition in mind that in verse 18 Jesus now instructs this church as how to rectify their situation: "*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.*" Being wretched, pitiful, poor and naked, the remedy which Christ prescribes is for this church must come as a shock to them. They must to come to their senses and give up trusting in their own material prosperity which is ultimately worthless. They must look to Christ, whose ability to supply them with what they truly need is inexhaustible.<sup>8</sup> This true prosperity of the messianic age is depicted by the prophet Isaiah, when in Isaiah 55:1 the prophet writes, "*Come, all you who are thirsty; come to the*

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 92.

*waters, and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*” In Christ are found all of the riches and treasures of heaven. And this treasure is freely offered to us, if we humbly receive it with the empty hands of faith.

What the Laodiceans truly need then is to participate in the new creation through faith in Jesus Christ’s victory over death and the grave. What these people truly need is the righteousness of Christ, which he alone has earned for them through the refiner’s fire of the cross and the empty tomb and which covers the shameful nakedness (the unrighteousness) of those in this church who have forgotten all about what constitutes the true riches of which Christ is speaking. But the imagery of refining by fire also seems to suggest that the Laodiceans must be purified themselves, in the sense of removing all those pagan influences from their midst which have led to their complacency. Therefore, they must clothe themselves with Christ and purify themselves from the influences of the spirit of the age. Furthermore, these people need the salve of the Law and the gospel to open their eyes so that they might see their true condition—wretched, not rich—come to their senses, and repent, before it is too late.

Indeed, Jesus is Lord of his church and he will punish all those who do not repent. But this does not mean Jesus is cruel or unloving. On the contrary, says Jesus, *“those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.”* If Christ cared nothing for his people, he would simply leave this church in its wretched condition and come to them in judgment without any final word of warning. But, says Paul, it is God’s kindness which leads sinners to repentance (Romans 2:4). And since Jesus loves his people, he rebukes and disciplines them. So, says Jesus to this disobedient and apathetic church, *“be earnest, and repent.”* These are words of love from the Lord of his church. For they constitute a final word of warning before he brings down his judgment upon this congregation.

That this is the case can be seen in the very next verse when the warning to repent is followed by an amazing invitation to those who do so. *“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”* It is truly an act of grace for Jesus to invite the members of this church to renew their fellowship with him which they claim to enjoy, but which in reality is all but gone.<sup>9</sup> While this verse is frequently misquoted, as though the context was an evangelistic one—Jesus stands outside the door of the human heart waiting for the person to open the door of their heart to him if only they will accept Christ as their personal savior—the fact of the matter is that this letter is written to Christians in the church of Laodicea who need to be reminded that their relationship with Christ must be renewed or face the judgment of Christ.

In fact, this verse echoes an ancient canticle (song) of a bridegroom who stands outside the door of the bedchamber, knocking, waiting for his wife to admit him. Likewise Christ is asking this church to invite him in so that his relationship with this church might be renewed in all of its fullness.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, having accepted Christ’s gracious invitation, Christ will dine with his people, which is most likely a reference to the fellowship of the savior with his people expressed in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. But this invitation must be heeded immediately because Christ is even now standing at the door of this church, knocking, waiting for his people to repent and invite him in to renew their fellowship.

As is the case in all of these letters, to those who repent, heed Christ’s warnings and continue to hold fast

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<sup>9</sup> Beale, Revelation, 307-308.

<sup>10</sup> Beale, Revelation, 308.

to that which has been revealed in the gospel, Jesus promises them that they will overcome. Says Jesus in verse 21, *“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.”* Those who acknowledge that Christ is the faithful witness, and that his testimony about this congregation’s spiritual condition is indeed true, Jesus will grant to them the right to rule in his messianic kingdom, a kingdom which dawned at his coming, continues to conquer unbelief despite the opposition from the beast, and a kingdom which will be fully realized at the end of the age, when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new.

The application for is simply this. The success of a church cannot be measured by its size, its property and buildings, or its wealth. It must be measured by its faithfulness to the gospel. While the world sees success in terms of numbers, programs, buildings, endowments and bank accounts, such things often times breed complacency and compromise. Indeed the church in Laodicea was able to obtain such wealth only by compromising the gospel message it proclaimed so as to make peace with the prosperous unbelievers around them. Only then did the church in Laodicea prosper. But it was a false success and led them into their lukewarm and pitiful condition.

What Christ asks of us as his people is that we seek not success, but that we seek to be faithful to the gospel which he has entrusted to us. Although all good things come from our father’s hand and God may indeed choose to bless certain churches with great prosperity, let us never mistakenly assume that the presence of wealth is the sign that we are being faithful to the will of God. That must be measured by the things we have seen throughout these seven letters: whether or not a church preaches the gospel, whether or not a church drives out false teachers from its midst, whether or not a church loves the brethren, not forsaking its first love, and whether or not its members will refuse to take the mark of the beast by acknowledging someone other than Christ is Lord, even if that act costs us our lives or our livelihoods. This is what Christ expects of us as he walks in our midst, and as we seek to be a witness of the gospel to those around us. If we do these things, we will overcome and receive all of those glorious things Christ has promised to his people. So on each Lord’s day, once again we open the door and invite our savior into our midst through his word and sacraments, so that we can dine with him and renew our fellowship with the Lord of the church.

*“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*