

## “THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA.”

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**Scripture Texts: Revelation 3:14-22**

### Introduction

My biggest struggle with Christianity when I was in high school was that I didn't see my need. I wasn't a bad kid doing bad things. I didn't have a lot of guilt or shame. I had what I needed, a good home, good family, good school, good grades, good friends, I was good. So I thought.

I was poor and didn't know it; I was naked and didn't know it; I was blind and didn't know it. The best thing that ever happened to me was when Jesus showed me the truth about me. And that's the only hope for Laodicea.

### **Laodicea: The City of Compromise**

We return to the book of Revelation this evening and the last of the seven churches to which Jesus dictated a letter. The vision John receives for Laodicea is a sign of God's grace in that it holds out salvation and hope to a church on the brink of destruction because of lukewarmness.

Laodicea was founded around 250 BC and was famous for three things.

They had a *guild of physicians* who developed a special eye salve with healing properties. The art of compounding medicines may have begun here.

They had a *textile or clothing guild*. They were particularly proud of their soft black glossy wool. They were a fashion center. Think Nordstroms or better, maybe Armani.

Laodicea was also famous as a *banking center*. It was the home of millionaires. They were proud of their self-sufficiency. They were rich and they knew it. This is lower Manhattan and Wall Street. Maybe Bellevue or Mercer Island.

Remember those devastating earthquakes that destroyed several of the cities in the region and how the Roman government help finance the rebuilding. Laodicea refused any aid boasting they could rebuild on their own and they did.

But also significant was the geographical location of Laodicea. As great a city as Laodicea was, it had one problem, their water was disgusting and inferior. They felt like spitting it out, in fact it caused vomiting. Big banks, stylish fashions, excellent medical care, and bad water.

Six miles across the valley from Laodicea was Hierapolis. Hierapolis to this day is famous for its medicinal hot springs. The mineral pools are spectacular. Now it's a tourist hot spot (pun intended).

To the south was Colossae which had pure, cold mountain streams.

To solve Laodicea's water problem an aqueduct of large stone pipes were cut and bored to bring the hot water from Hierapolis and the cold water from Colossae to Laodicea. In both cases by the time it arrived there it was lukewarm.

Christ condemnation of this church is going to be particularly meaningful and piercing to their heart and understanding.

### **Christ's Character Identified with the Church, vs. 14.**

Remember each letter begins with a description of Christ that's relevant to that church.

“The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.”

Three epithets or descriptions of the character of Christ.

#### ***Amen.***

Jesus is the Amen, meaning verily, or truly, truly I say to you.

**II Corinthians 1:20** 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.

This simply means Jesus the reliable one. God's yes and amen.

#### ***The faithful and true witness.***

Jesus is objective, unbiased, unable to be swayed or changed, His testimony is true. He is the standard, the fixed point. The words that follow are true and trustworthy, you can bank on them.

Christ is never above speaking strong words when such words are needed. He is a huge contrast to the ignorance in the church.

#### ***The beginning of God's creation.***

Jehovah's Witnesses love to grab hold of this verse to confirm their belief that Jesus was not eternal but was the first and best of God's creation.

Does this mean Jesus is the first of the created things? No, it means He is the source and agent of all creative activity. Both the Father and Jesus are the alpha and the omega.

The words that Jesus is about to utter are a very strong, harsh warning. Only Jesus has the authority to say all that He says to the church and the power to carry out the threats and the promises.

We have seen how with each letter the description of Jesus is relevant to that church. And Jesus' words of commendation or condemnation fit exactly the circumstances of each church. Jesus is always relevant, He is always tuned in to exactly what is going on. And that is still true today.

### **Christ's Commendation and Condemnation, vss. 15-17.**

Of the seven churches this is the only one about which Christ has nothing good to say.

What a stunning thing to consider that the church with the most going for it in terms of finances and success and strength, is the church that receives no praise from Jesus.

One of the greatest threats to the church of Jesus Christ is prosperity. It may be worse than persecution and adversity. Affluence makes us self-sufficient and masks our deepest needs.

### ***Neither hot nor cold, but Lukewarm.***

You are neither hot like Hierapolis or cold like Colossea, but you are like the impure water in our own city.

What does lukewarm mean in this context? Jesus quotes them as saying, "I am rich, I have prospered, and ***I need nothing.***"

Their lukewarmness and complacency are due to their spiritual ***ignorance*** and blindness. They are clueless about their spiritual state. They made the mistake of thinking worldly affluence and influence meant all was well. Their pockets were full, but their hearts were empty.

The depth of their lukewarmness and ignorance is seen in the statement, "***I need nothing.***"

Those are some of the saddest, most troubling words in Scripture. Those are the words of a soul lost in its own self-absorption.

Those words penetrate to the depths of the issue. The whole point of the gospel is to expose the depth of our need and calls us to reliance on Christ.

The words of Jesus must have come as a devastating shock. To be lukewarm is to be the worst thing they could be. This is as bad as it gets. He would rather they were anything other than what they are.

They leave a bad taste in Jesus' mouth. Picture Jesus putting a cup of water to His lips expecting a cool drink, only to spew the water out on the ground. This is not a picture of people who will receive His salvation.

A lukewarm Christian is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, an unacceptable condition, there won't be lukewarm Christians in heaven. They think they are close to heaven when they are actually on the brink of hell.

“The essence of lukewarmness is the statement, "I need nothing." The lukewarm are spiritually self-satisfied. To find out whether you are among that number, don't look into your head to see if you think that you are needy; rather, look at your prayer life.

Do you seek the Lord earnestly and often in secret for deeper knowledge of Christ, for greater earnestness in prayer, for more boldness in witness, for sweeter joy in the Holy Spirit, for deeper sorrow for sin, for warmer compassion for the lost, for more divine power to love? Or is the coolness and perfunctoriness of your prayer life Exhibit A that you are spiritually self-satisfied and lukewarm?” (John Piper, excerpted from *How to Buy Gold When You're Broke*).

### **Christ's Challenge, Threats and Promises, vs. 18-22.**

But all is not lost. Even for a church like Laodicea there is still hope, an opportunity held out to repent and return. To the church that is in the darkest condition, to the church that is blind and ignorant, Christ gives the strongest and greatest hope.

Jesus is the one who has everything they need, and all we need.

#### ***Buy gold from Jesus that you may be rich.***

Like the pearl of great price, buy salvation which is better than gold and makes you richer than all earth's riches. Faith and trust in Jesus is the best security.

#### ***Buy white garments to cover the shame of your nakedness.***

In Scripture there is a deep connection between shame and clothing. Remember Adam and Eve in the garden. After they sinned they felt the shame of their nakedness. In sin we are naked before God without any means of covering ourselves. Only Jesus can cover our shame and sin.

#### ***Buy salve to anoint your eyes.***

They saw themselves as needing nothing. Jesus offers them sight to see themselves as they really are. We need spiritual vision to see spiritual things.

In a word, Jesus is saying buy salvation. Salvation is gold because it makes us rich; it is white garments because it covers our nakedness with His righteousness; it is eye-salve because it opens our blind eyes to see spiritually.

What we most need we must buy from Jesus. He is the only seller and He meets every need.

***[3:19, those whom I love, I discipline, be zealous and repent.***

To be rebuked by Christ means two things, you are loved, and there is still a chance to repent.

Jesus is saying these hard words are the words of kindness, the words of truth in love, words meant to lead to repentance and salvation and eternal life.

Repent and be zealous. Repentance is the evidence of faith, of right understanding about our sickness, our sin. The day we stop repenting is the day we slip toward lukewarmness.

***3:20, Behold I stand and knock.***

Note the immediacy of Christ.

Christ has the riches, the robes, and the healing ointment.

Christ comes, extends the offer, stands at the very threshold and knocks.

Christ speaks that they hear His voice.

The divine initiative comes first, the human response is necessary.

How do we buy this gold and get this robe? By not leaving Jesus standing out on the porch like a salesman. By opening the doors of our heart and letting Him all the way in. Open all the doors of your soul and He will come in and sit and eat, and give you all the riches and all the garments and all the medicine your soul needs.

This is the cure for lukewarmness and spiritual complacency and self-satisfaction, to admit our need and open the door.

***He that overcomes I will grant to sit with me.***

This seems to be the most incredible of all the promises of reward made to any of the churches. A promise that the repentant will have a seat on the throne of heaven and at the divine banquet table.

Talk about your rags to riches story. From poverty to plenitude, from nakedness to robes, from blindness to the pinnacle of vision on the highest throne. We shall reign with Christ.

**Application and conclusion.**

Of the seven churches in Revelation this is the one most often preached from. This is the condition judged to be most prevalent and most relevant to the church in America.

They are the most like us, living in 2,000 square foot houses, indoor plumbing, nice incomes, nice clothes, best medical care around. And all of this is God's blessing, but because of it they are complacent, they assume they deserve all this and that it will continue.

Do our comforts cause us to be lukewarm toward God? What is our assessment of ourselves and our spiritual condition? Just between you and no one, in your own private thoughts what is your perception of yourself?

Do you find Jesus' assessment of our human condition shocking or off-putting, that we are wretched, pitiable, poor, naked and blind? Does it ever bother you to sing what we sang this morning, "Amazing grace that saved a wretch like me"?

Jesus comes to drive out any lukewarm spirit. He tells us our true condition and then waits for our response. Do we take Him at His Word? And do we accept His remedy?

A lukewarm or indifferent response is never an appropriate response to anything in our faith.

Are you rich in the riches of Christ? Are you clothed in the garments of His righteousness? Are you enabled to see the truth about Him and about you because He has touched your blind eyes?

Are you satisfied in Jesus and nothing else matters? As we confess a bit ago, may He make our obedience fresh and vibrant.

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

**Prayer:**

Holy Father, thank you that you are the God of truth and that you speak the truth to us in love. Thank you for loving us so much not to flatter us or gloss over stuff, but that you care for our eternal souls and you don't let us stay complacent.

Father, we know that we are always in danger of lukewarmness, we are tempted to coast along, to be complacent. Stir up in us a fresh vision of the true condition of our souls and give us a sense of urgency to turn back to a total dependence on you, to seek you with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Make us dissatisfied with just going along to get along, with the average comfortable middle class American life. Stir us up to a passion for you, for the Gospel, for a complete commitment to you. Awaken the sleeping churches of our community and nation. Wake us up to eternal things, things that matter, things that count.

Come Holy Spirit, open our blind eyes, revives us again with a spirit of genuine repentance and sincere faith, for the sake of the glory of God and the glory of Christ's church.