

Lesson 8: Message To The Churches – Laodicea

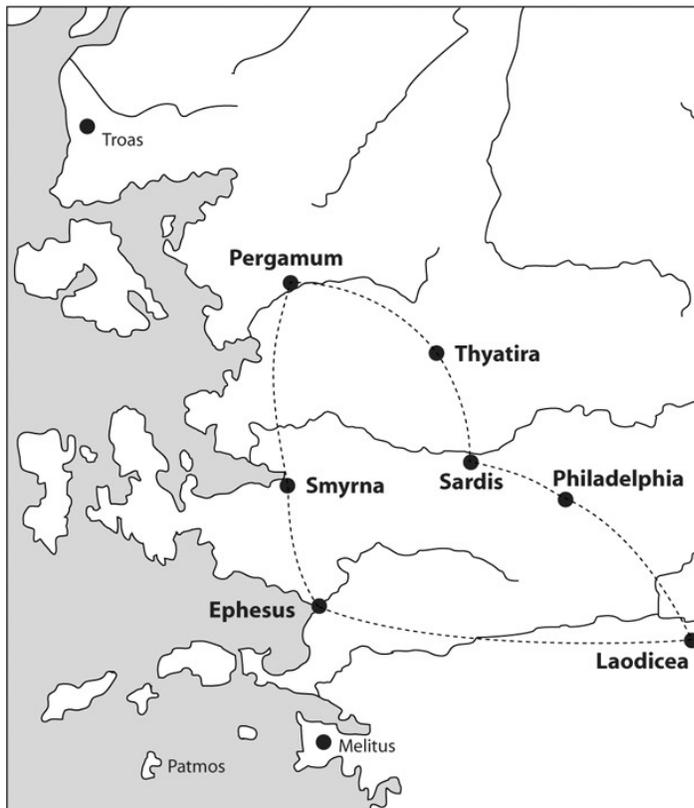
Key Text: Revelation 3:14-22

Lesson Objectives

In this lesson we will:

- a) Discover the message of Jesus sent to the church in Laodicea

THE SEVEN CHURCHES



To each individual church Jesus presents himself in a unique way. No church gets the whole Jesus, and no two of them share the same aspect of Jesus. The key to the section. As the various churches are weighed and discussed one can see the living Christ in action among His own people. He does not appear to them as the terrible sovereign on the throne nor as the conqueror riding to battle. He walks among them as a Lord who seeks to commend their virtues even more than to expose and punish their faults. These letters are His particular warning and counsel to the church of all time as its various aspects appear under the guise of their seven historic places. The glorified Lord still walks in the midst of his church. He speaks to his end-time church today through the Revelation of Jesus Christ. He presents himself to his people in various ways, addressing problems in their different life situations and needs. He meets them where they are now, as he met the Christians of those seven congregations in the province of Asia in John's day.

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA - HISTORY

The city was founded by the Seleucid king Antiochus II sometime before 253 b.c., when he divorced his wife Laodice, after whom he had named the city. He built on the site of an earlier settlement named Rhoas in order to establish Seleucid control of the region. For the next one hundred fifty years the two trade routes became more and more important, and Laodicea rose in prominence with them, eventually outstripping Colosse, the original major city. In 188 b.c. a Roman treaty switched it from Seleucid to Pergameme control; and when that kingdom was bequeathed to Rome (133 b.c.), it came under Roman rule. When other cities joined various revolts against Rome, Laodicea remained loyal, and so it thrived further.

The church, like the city itself, had grown fat and complacent, satisfied with its wealth but quite devoid of any spiritual depth. This letter has nothing good to say about Laodicea, which was thus worse than Sardis. There does not seem to be a hint of a faithful minority (as in 3:4).

Description of Jesus (v. 14)

To the church of Laodicea, Jesus identifies himself with three titles. First, Jesus is ***the Amen***. The word “amen” comes to us from Hebrew via Greek and basically means “in truth”; according to Barclay, it was used “to affirm and to guarantee a statement as absolutely true and trustworthy.” This title reminds one of Isaiah 65:16 where God is called “the God of truth” (in Hebrew, “God of *amen*”). In the gospels, Jesus often begins his statement with, “Truly, truly, I say to you” (*amen* in Greek; cf. John 1:51; 3:3, 5, 11).

It is clear that Jesus is the model for persevering “faithfulness” as a “testimony” to the world of the superiority of God’s way. In the Apocalypse both “faithfulness” (see on 2:10) and “witness” (see 2:13; 11:3; 17:6) are connected with suffering and especially martyrdom as the final “witness” to overcoming the world. Christ as the “slain Lamb” (5:6, et al.) is the epitome of such a “witness.” Christ is “true” in 3:7, 14; and 19:11; and God is “true” in 6:10; 15:3; 16:7; 19:2, 9. The Father and the Son in this book are clearly also one in their “truthfulness.” All three terms are in deliberate contrast with the lukewarm Laodiceans, who were neither faithful nor true to Christ and whose witness was virtually nonexistent.

The third title, literally “the ruler of God’s creation” is linked with the “Amen” title due to Isa. 65:17, which follows “the God of truth” with “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth.” God’s truthfulness is particularly seen in his control of creation, and here this is also a major attribute of Jesus as the Son of God. Yet it is also well known to the Laodiceans because of the letter written to their sister church, Col. 1:15–16, “He is ... the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created” (see also Prov. 8:22; John 1:3). Also, in Col. 1:18 Jesus is further described as the “beginning” or preeminent one. Some scholars think the same heresy in Colosse may have made inroads in Laodicea. Although this cannot be known, and there are no hints of it in this letter, it is possible. A characteristic of the false gospel in Colosse was a denigration of Jesus as creator of the physical world. They believed Jesus was a mediating power but not the supreme power behind creation. In their wealth and complacency, they thought of themselves as in control; Jesus is telling them that he alone controls creation; he is the very source of their wealth and power.

“Strengths” (3:15,16)

As in the letter to Sardis, the regular formula for the positive aspects of the church is filled with irony. It is rhetorically powerful, for in effect it declares, “This is the best thing I can say about you.” The statement, “you are neither hot nor cold” has been the subject of much speculation down through the centuries. Until the mid-twentieth century, it was moralized as “hot or cold spiritually.” The problem with this was explaining why Jesus would rather they be “cold” spiritually than “lukewarm.”

More and more, however, it has been argued that the metaphor stems from Laodicea’s water supply. Six miles to the north lay Hierapolis, famed for its hot springs. Ten miles to the east lay Colosse, known for its cold, pure drinking water. Hierapolis’s streams were so well known for their healing qualities that the city became a major health center, while the cold, life-giving water of Colosse, the only place in the region it was available, may account for its original settlement. Laodicea had no water supply of its own. It was founded at the junction of trade routes not for its natural but for its commercial and military advantages. When it piped in its water from the hot springs of Denizli (see the introduction to this letter), the water did not have enough time to cool in the aqueducts but arrived “lukewarm”.

Even today, people in the area place the water in jars to cool. Historical documents show that it was the temperature as well as the minerals that made the water undrinkable. In this sense it is their barren works rather than their spirituality that is the focus, which fits the opening “I know your works.” Of course, there is no radical difference between the two, for its “deeds” showed its spiritual barrenness.

Jesus then says devastatingly, “I wish that you were either cold or hot.” The church should not have matched its water supply. The Laodiceans should have

been known for their spiritual healing (like Hierapolis) or their refreshing, life-giving ministry (like Colosse). Instead, as Jesus' next statement reads, they were "lukewarm." They were devoid of works and useless to the Lord. As a result, Jesus is "about to vomit you out of my mouth".

Very soon, God's judgment will fall. The mineral waters were full of calcium carbonate deposits, and the effect of attempting to drink the water would be to vomit (the Greek verb is apparent in the English word "emetic," referring to a substance that induces vomiting). The water flowing over the cliffs of Hierapolis left spectacular deposits that were visible from Laodicea. Scholars describe the scenic wonders well: "Hot, sparkling waters rise from deep pools on the city plateau.... The cliff ... is some 300 feet high and extends nearly a mile. Its ever-changing reflections of light and color are unspeakably beautiful, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the snowy peak of Cadmus."

Yet all this beauty also reminded Laodicea that their water was undrinkable. As such, it provided a perfect metaphor for the shallowness of the church: beautiful outwardly and sickening inwardly! The exalted Christ is challenging them with a powerful rhetorical question, "Don't you realize that you make me sick?"

Jesus prefers that the church be either hot or cold. The lukewarm condition denotes a compromise. The Laodiceans are divided between Christ and the world. Their lukewarm condition indicates that they have fallen into the status of indifference and self-sufficiency. They have lost their original enthusiasm and zeal for spiritual matters (see 3:19). Their lukewarm condition provides "neither refreshment for the spiritually weary, nor healing for the spiritually sick." It appears that there is more hope for an antagonistic and opposing spirit than for the attitude of compromise and indifference. Christ detests a divided loyalty and service: "No man can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13).

Problem/Solution (3:17)

The basis of their lukewarm spirituality and God's imminent judgment is now given. The Laodiceans were immensely wealthy, and this led to ***self-sufficiency and complacency***, a deadly combination for the Christian. Their problem was, you say, "I am rich". Because they were materially "rich," they assumed that they were also spiritually "rich."

Scholars describe the wealth of Laodicea in great detail. The entire region was rich, and Laodicea was often chosen as the major example of this wealth. Coins from there depict cornucopias, a symbol of wealth and affluence. A man named Hiero bequeathed two thousand talents (several million dollars in today's terms) to the city, and the Zenonid family was so wealthy and powerful that several of their members achieved the status of royalty (Polemos was even named "king") under the Romans. The problem, however, was not wealth per se but the smug self-satisfaction it engendered.

They also said, "I have wealth and need nothing". In a.d. 60 a devastating earthquake leveled their city, but they rebuilt it without help from Rome. Moreover, the buildings that resulted from the reconstruction were remarkable: a gymnasium, a stadium with a semicircular track nine hundred feet long, a triple gate and towers, and several beautiful buildings. In other words, the town was perhaps even more beautiful after the reconstruction. The church was like the city, believing that its material wealth connoted spiritual wealth.

The problem was, the city had no perceived need for help from Rome, and the church had no perceived need for help from God. Thus the exalted Christ sums up their spiritual dilemma: "you do not realize that you are wretched and pitiful and poor and blind and naked". Note the preponderance of first-person singulars in their claims: "I am ... I have ... I have." Their boastful pride and self-sufficiency rendered them "blind" to the truth. Their lack of "knowledge" led them to miss one essential truth, that they had no spiritual wealth whatsoever.

With no external pressure from pagan (like Sardis) or Jewish (like Smyrna or Philadelphia) persecution, with no internal threat from heretical movements (like

Ephesus, Pergamum, or Thyatira), they had succumbed to their own affluent lifestyle, and they did not even know it!

The Laodiceans are not condemned for apostasy or heresy. Jesus finds no serious sin in them. Yet, he finds no good thing to say about them. They are not even persecuted. Their main problem is indifference. It appears that they have been infected by the city's pride and self-sufficiency as expressed through their attitude: ***I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.***

The city of Laodicea prided itself on its material wealth, clothing trade, and popular eyesalve. This spirit evidently crept into the church; the Laodicean Christians were putting their trust in their own wealth. Yet they may have regarded it as a "blessing from God," thus being deceived as to their "true spiritual condition." This reminds us of the boast of Ephraim in the Old Testament: "Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors they will find in me no iniquity, which would be sin" (Hos. 12:8).

While the church in Smyrna appears poor, yet in reality is rich (Rev. 2:9), the Laodiceans think that they are rich, while in reality are poor in their spiritual pride. ***You do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.*** They are blind to their own condition and think themselves the opposite of what they really are: spiritually they are extremely poor (as the Greek text indicates), naked, and blind. The one who does not know, and the one who does not know that he knows not, are both in the same precarious position.

Their actual state is described by five successive adjectives that separate naturally into two groups: their general situation (wretched and pitiful) and their specific description (poor, blind, and naked), with the last three stemming from the three areas of Laodicean wealth and leading into 3:18, where the solution centers on their specific problems.

Counsel (3:18-20)

The introductory words of verse 18 are important. Christ begins by saying, “I counsel you”. The verb means to “give advice” and is used elsewhere only in John 18:14, where Caiaphas “advised” the Jews that “one man should die for the people.” It deliberately understates (using language of advice for a command) the seriousness of the situation: “Let me give you some advice. You should” The Laodiceans should use their “wealth” to “buy” spiritual and not just material rewards. The key here is “to buy from me”. The commercial nature of the verb is perfect for this city; they had “bought” everything from earthly merchants and so had gone to the wrong “store.” Christ is the only proper source of goods that will last, so they have to switch their broker from the marketplace to him.

Jesus’ counsel to the church corresponds to the Laodiceans’ self-deceptive condition. First, Jesus counsels them **to buy from me gold refined in fire that you may be rich**. The fact that the Laodiceans are urged **to buy** suggests that they have to give something in exchange for what they can receive. They have an evident need to give up their pride and self-sufficiency. The New Testament text that helps us understand what Jesus meant by offering to the Laodiceans **gold refined in fire** is 1 Peter 1:7, where it stands figuratively for faith which has been tested: “That the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” A person may have wealth, but wealth cannot buy and secure happiness and spirituality.

First, they are actually poor and so need to purchase from Christ “gold refined by fire”. This builds on the banking and commerce of the city. They think their accumulated possessions have made them rich (3:17), but they are actually poverty-stricken because they have purchased the wrong things. The idea of “purified” gold also appears in 1 Pet. 1:7 (“gold, which perishes even though refined by fire”) in a context of suffering and may recall Ps. 66:10 (“you refined us like silver”; cf. Zech. 13:9; Isa. 1:25). Some scholars see here a reference to the purifying effect of suffering. If 3:19 is understood to mean that God is going to send trials, it reinforces this connection between purified gold and personal suffering.

The purpose is true wealth. There is a double irony here. They think they are rich but are actually poor; the only way they can be truly wealthy is to “purchase” gold from Jesus. Yet this cannot be bought; it must be accepted as a gift on the basis of faith. Note the contrast with Smyrna, which was poor in this world but spiritually rich, while Laodicea had all the wealth of this world but was spiritually poverty-stricken.

The city was famed for its glossy black wool, but these wealthy Christians were actually naked. In other words, it is possible to wear Armani suits and Dior dresses but to be “naked” in the eyes of God. The two verbs, “clothed” and “not revealed” would indicate this. They were clothed in the finest earthly garb but were actually “revealed” or “exposed” as naked before God. Here there is undoubtedly a reference to the Jewish view that nakedness was “shameful”. Also, in the OT nakedness is a symbol of judgment (Isa. 20:1–4; Ezek. 16:36; 23:10), and “shame” means to be disgraced and liable to judgment. When God brings a person to shame in both OT and NT, judgment is the result.

The primary reference is to the shame brought by the divine judgment.” By contrast, to receive fine new clothing indicated honor, as with Joseph in Gen. 41:42 or Mordecai in Esth. 6:6–11. Throughout Revelation, “white” garments symbolize righteousness (3:4, 5; 6:11; 7:9; 19:14), being washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:13–14), and glory in God’s final kingdom (4:4; 19:14). This is obviously a call for repentance, for realizing the shame of their true spiritual nakedness and purchasing (at no cost!) the gift (Isa. 55:1) of righteousness in Christ.

Third, the Laodiceans were blind in spite of the fame of their medical center and the eye salve it developed. In other words, their earthly accomplishments were meaningless (in actuality a hindrance) in light of their spiritual blindness. John 9 is the perfect parallel, with its contrast between the man born blind (coming first to physical sight and then to spiritual insight) and the Pharisees (who claimed spiritual sight but were progressively revealed to be blind). The key verse is 9:39, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” The Laodiceans must be “anointed” with God’s “eye salve” and see themselves as they really are. This eye salve symbolizes new heart, fellowship with God, the Word of God, the grace and forgiveness of God, and the work of the Holy Spirit. As before, the meaning is that they must “see” their spiritual blindness,

repent, and receive spiritual healing from Christ, who alone is the source of the healing.

The Laodiceans are not left in a hopeless situation; they are still given an opportunity to repent. ***As many as I love, I discipline and reprove; therefore, be zealous and repent.*** This is a direct allusion to Proverbs 3:12: “For whom God loves He reproveth, even as a father, the son in whom he delights” (cf. Job 5:17). Christ loves the Laodiceans, and in his love he disciplines and corrects them. Paul says that we are “disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world” (1 Cor. 11:32). The purpose of divine discipline is further explained by the author of Hebrews:

My Son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproveth by Him. For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Heb. 12:5b–11)

It is especially interesting that of the seven churches, only the Philadelphians and Laodiceans are explicitly told that they are loved by Christ. Christ loves his faithful people; even those not faithful are likewise the subject of his love. This love is expressed, however, in the form of discipline and rebuke with the purpose of making them zealous (which is equivalent to “hot”) to repent. Repentance is turning around and breaking with the present situation. Repentance means the reversal of the direction of life in order to face God.

In light of this expression of divine love via discipline, the only possible reaction is, “be zealous and repent”. The zeal precedes rather than follows the repentance. A “zeal” or eagerness to get right with God must replace the “lukewarm” spirituality that characterized the church. That zeal will be seen in “repentance” (see 2:5, 16, 22; 3:3).

The Laodiceans had been blind to their own indifferent spirituality. They had apparently listened to their worldly affluence rather than Christ and had thought material success meant they were right with God (a mistaken theology that paralleled some aspects of ancient Jewish thinking and continues today). Their enthusiasm needed to change focus from self to God, and the only way to do so was to repent.

The loving compassion that in 3:19a was exemplified in discipline is now exemplified in invitation in 3:20. This verse has all too often been misunderstood as an evangelistic call to the unsaved to become Christians. However, that does not fit the context. Rather, it is a call to a weak church to repent (as in 3:19). At the same time, it is a challenge to every individual in that church (indeed, in every church; see 3:22) to open themselves up to Christ and invite him into their lives. Finally, it is a promise that if they will do so, Christ will “enter” into deep fellowship with them.

Christ is presently at the “door” of each one’s heart, announcing himself and knocking. The picture of Christ standing at the door and knocking may reflect Song 5:2, where the beloved says, “Listen! My lover is knocking; ‘Open to me ... my darling.’ ” Christ’s compassion is nowhere better exemplified than in this image of him as a loving visitor seeking admittance to one’s home.

But there is a condition—“If any hear my voice and open the door.” This emphasizes the importance of personal response. Christ does not force entry but rather makes himself available. The individual must make a decision to allow him to enter. The opening challenge, “hear my voice,” anticipates the call to listen in 3:22 and is the preparatory action. Christ identifies himself at the “door” and calls for a response. The person then responds in repentance and “opens the door” to Christ.

The result is table fellowship. Christ first “will come in to them” and then “will dine with them and they with me.” Note the progression of the metaphor. Jesus arrives at the door as a visitor, identifies himself, and seeks admission. The person must respond, open the door, and allow him admittance. Fellowship results as they share a meal. Spiritually, this denotes a call to repentance and the believer’s response in getting right with Christ.

The imagery of “dining” stems from the Near Eastern practice of table fellowship. To share a meal in the ancient world was to share a life. When people were estranged, a meal invitation opened the way to reconciliation. Even everyday mealtimes were highly complex events in which social values, boundaries, statuses and hierarchies were reinforced.” Jesus broke many of those boundaries by sharing meals with “sinners” in order to tell the religious establishment that in God’s kingdom all were welcome on the grounds not of acceptability but of response to God’s call (see Mark 3:13–17). In so doing, he showed he was a “friend” of sinners (Matt. 11:16–19).

Thus the promise here is of acceptance, sharing, and blessing, a deep fellowship with the one offering forgiveness and reconciliation with God. In this there is a foretaste of the final messianic banquet (Rev. 19:6–9; cf. Luke 13:29; 22:29–30). The depth of sharing with Christ attained through spiritual growth of this kind anticipates the total unity to be achieved with God and Christ in eternity (Rev. 21:1–22:5).

5. Promise to Overcomer (3:21)

Jesus makes a promise to the overcomer in the church in Laodicea: ***I will grant to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat with my Father on his throne.***

Here we find the reality of the Christian’s status in Christ. This promise to the Laodiceans includes all other promises. As Jesus Christ has already been exalted on the throne of the universe at the right hand of the Father, so God “raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6).

This picture becomes much clearer if we keep in mind that in the ancient Near East the throne “was more like a couch than a single seat.” God’s faithful people have been promised a share with Jesus on his throne. They are *already* elevated in the heavenly places (cf. Rev. 1:6; 5:9–10). Yet the final fulfillment of the promise to the overcomer to share the throne with Christ will be realized at the Second Coming (cf. Rev. 20:4–6).

Call to hear the Spirit: The message to the church in Laodicea is directed to all who put their trust in their material and temporal prosperity—those in a condition of self-sufficiency who believe that their material prosperity is a given favor from God. When Christians today, like the church in Laodicea, look lukewarm and feel halfhearted in their relationship with Christ, the best solution is to take the advice offered by Jesus: “I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in fire that you may be rich, and white garments that you may clothe yourself, so that the shame of your nakedness may not be exposed, and eyesalve to anoint your eyes so that you may see” (Rev. 3:18).

What the Laodiceans need above all is eyesalve to clearly discern their real spiritual condition. The fact that they are free from apostasy or heresy, that no serious sin is found among them, and that they have a very positive opinion of themselves is not a guarantee of their relationship with Christ. Jesus longs to become the focus of all the church’s attention—the center of its life, worship, activities, and behavior. Even though the church as a whole is in a condition of self-sufficiency and halfhearted service to God, the call for repentance is directed to each member. Jesus is waiting for individuals to respond. This is what will bring revival and reformation to the lukewarm and halfhearted church of Laodicea.

Historical application. Although the message to the Laodiceans primarily had a local application in John’s time, the church in Laodicea was evidently also set as a model for the Christian church of the last period of earth’s history. This idea is supported by verbal and conceptual parallels between the message to Laodicea and the final warning to Christians living at the threshold of the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16:15). This last church appears to be the most troubled one; it goes through the motions of great political, religious, and secular upheavals and faces challenges that no previous generation of Christians did. Yet it is a half-hearted and self-sufficient church, characterized by lukewarmness and a struggle with the issues of its authenticity. In such a way, the message to the ancient church in Laodicea is especially appropriate to the life and experience of Christians living in the concluding period of the world’s history.