

**Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb**  
*Hot, Cold and Lukewarm*  
Revelation 3:14-22

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**Text:**

<sup>14</sup> “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation. <sup>15</sup> “ ‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. <sup>18</sup> I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. <sup>19</sup> Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. <sup>20</sup> Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. <sup>21</sup> The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

**Introduction:**

Without a doubt, the letter to the church of Laodicea is the most familiar of all the letters written to the seven ancient Asia churches. More people have heard sermons on this passage than perhaps any other passage in the book of Revelation. No doubt, you have heard sermons on Christian zeal taken from Jesus’ words that he would rather have you hot or cold, but not lukewarm. No doubt you have heard evangelistic sermons preached from this text: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” No doubt you have heard end-times sermons preached encouraging you to spur on in faithfulness since we are in the last days – the Laodicean age. In my view, this letter is one of the most abused passages in the entire Bible.

I do not take the seven churches as seven epochs of church history placing us at the end of time in the Laodicean age. Instead, I take the seven letters as seven literal letters to seven literal churches in the Province of Asia. Their order in the list follows the route a 1<sup>st</sup> century courier would have taken as he followed the mail route of his day. He would have started at the port city of Ephesus then traveled to Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Their order does not follow the period of church history leading us up to the end; it follows an ancient courier mail route.

I reject seeing the seven letters as seven sequential epochs of church history for a second reason. That is, each of the letters ends the same way: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” The word “churches” is plural. Each church was

instructed to listen to the other churches' letters. That is to say, each letter was written to every church. All of the letters are instructive not just the letter to our age.

Therefore, I take the letters to be seven letters representative of the church as a whole. That is, there will always be local churches that comprise the church as a whole that will struggle with certain areas. All of the letters become constructive to us as we exist as a church. How are we like Ephesus? How are we like Smyrna? Is there anything that reflects a bit of Laodicea in our gathering? All of the letters are to be read and understood as Christ's word to the church.

Now, that being said, let's seek to understand the church of Laodicea as we have the other six.

### **Background**

First, some background information is extremely helpful. Laodicea was the most prominent of the three cities of the Lycus Valley. Turn with me to Colossians 4:12-13

<sup>12</sup>Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. <sup>13</sup>For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

What are the three cities? Paul is writing to the Colossians: "I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you – that is, Colosse and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis." These are the three cities that rested in the fertile Lycus River Valley. It also seems likely that the churches were started by Epaphras.

Laodicea, as the most prominent of the three cities was a major center for trade, transportation and commerce since it was located at the crossroads that linked Mesopotamia with the Aegean Sea. And in particular, there were three prominent features of the city's robust importance: its economy with its banking center, its medical college and its clothing (textile) industry. The most appalling feature of the city was its water supply.

Do you recall the devastating earthquake that destroyed Philadelphia in 60 A.D.? Do you remember that Philadelphia received aid for reconstruction from Rome? And as a result of Philadelphia's aid, they re-named their city "Neocaesarea" which means "the new city of Caesar." Do you recall? Well the same earthquake decimated Laodicea as well. Only they refused aid from Rome and chose to re-build the city themselves with their own resources. They rebuilt the city with its own resources. So when you read the words at the beginning of v.17, "For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing'" you can understand the attitude of self-sufficiency that described this community – both the city and the church.

A second feature to the town's prominence was its medical college. This was a cutting-edge medical school in the field of ophthalmology. Ancient sources mention the invention of a "Phrygian powder" that was used to make eye salve, and it was most likely in this college where it was first discovered. People came from miles around to find the cure that this salve brought.

And the third feature of the city was its textile industry. Only in Laodicea was there the breeding of a black sheep for its black wool. The result was something akin to our denim. Denim is extremely durable and popular for both casual, work and sport, it is not, however, deemed a classy garment. However, it is extremely popular. Well, the clothing that came from this black wool was extremely popular for much the same reasons that Levi's are popular. It's not high-class clothing but it sells.

We will come back to these features again at the end. But as I mentioned before, the most appalling feature of the city was its insipid and putrid water supply. Archeologists have unearthed an aquifer that reveals something of the city's problem. Hierapolis, located on a plateau some six miles to the north, was famous for its natural hot springs with their medicinal values. You know what it's like to sit in a hot tub or a whirlpool. 1<sup>st</sup> century Hierapolis had their natural hot sulfur springs. Colosse, located ten miles to the east, on the other hand, received wonderfully cool and pure drinking water from a mountain stream. Laodicea had neither. Instead, it had to pipe its water supply from these cities so that by the time it traveled the pipeline and reached them, it was lukewarm, insipid and putrid sulfur water that was really good for nothing. It had neither medicinal nor drinking value. Do you see what Jesus' point is, then?

<sup>15</sup> “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

Sit in hot springs and you kind of go, “Aahh.” Drink clear, cold, mountain spring water and you kind of go, “Aahh!” Drink in some lukewarm sulfur water and you kind of go, “Ssssppt!” It's good for nothing.

You see, any kind of preaching or any interpretation of this passage that tries to see Jesus as saying he prefers an outright rebellion or a white-hot zeal over against a wishy-washy middle-of-the-road Christian drastically violates the whole teaching of Scripture and dramatically destroys the beautiful connection Jesus makes with this church's historical background. What Jesus despises is Christians who are good for nothing Christians. Laodicea had become a church that was useless for Christ because it was self-sufficient, self-satisfied and indifferent.

There is a massive implication here for us: A city's culture very easily worms its way into the church. The Laodicean church's affluence and self-sufficient attitude mirrored the town's mindset. And Jesus rebukes them for their boast:

<sup>17</sup> For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing [Do you hear their boast? But notice how Jesus continues. Yet], not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

As a point of interest, this is the only church, to which Jesus says absolutely nothing positive. He only has rebuke and contempt. You may think you are rich, prosperous and in need of nothing, but you are really poor, blind and naked.

What Jesus finds repugnant – as repugnant as the city's tepid, polluted, nauseating water supply – is the church's superficial complacency, resting on the delusion that fiscal affluence will insulate it from need. Laodicea suffered spiritually because of its “affluenza.”

At this point I think you can begin to grasp what v. 14 means. Because the condition of the Laodicean church was not as it seemed to them, they needed to hear from the “Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.”

This was a church “smug in self-deception” as Dennis Johnson puts it. Thus, Jesus comes in as the true Amen. The Hebrews adverb which gives us the word “amen” means the acknowledgment of that which is sure and valid – that which reliable. Jesus is the acknowledgment of all that is sure and valid. Jesus is the absolute reality. He is the embodiment of all God’s promises according to Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:20. When God makes a promise, Jesus is the Amen. Jesus is the one who makes all promises a reality. Jesus is the acknowledgment that all God’s promises are reliable. Jesus is the executor of all God’s purposes. If God has a plan, Jesus is the Amen. He is the one who testifies to its completion and perfection.

Jesus is the embodiment of all God’s promises and the executor of all God’s purposes. He attests to their reality and reliability. Jesus is the true Amen. He is the faithful and true witness. Jesus’ word shames the church’s self-deception because when he speaks truth, it is utterly reliable and relevant. Though they thought they were sufficient: rich, prosperous and in need in nothing, the true Amen says, “You are poor, blind and naked.”

But Jesus is also the sum total of all God’s resources. He is quite simply the “beginning of God’s creation.” He is the prime source of all things. From him and through and to him flow all things (cf. Rom 11:34-36). Although the church of Laodicea thought it was wealthy and self-sufficient, the true Amen says, “You have nothing.” They were not looking to Christ for their sufficiency but to themselves. So what is Jesus’ counsel?

<sup>18</sup> **I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.**

Once they see that they are poor – destitute before Jesus – where should they turn for their wealth, their sufficiency? They should to turn to Christ and buy from him pure gold. Now isn’t this a kind of paradox? How can an impoverished person with no money buy gold from anyone?

Look at what God said in Isaiah 55:1-3:

<sup>1</sup> “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. <sup>2</sup> Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. <sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

Only those who cannot pay may purchase and the cost is nothing. It’s free to all those who have no money. Come take your fill. What is Jesus saying? Isn’t he simply preaching the gospel again to this delusional church? God’s gold, God’s wealth is free to the poor. How much would you like to buy?

Everything we need and the only things we need come from him who is the beginning of creation – from him who is the source and sum of all that God is.

You don't need more money.

You don't need better health.

You don't need more security.

You only need that which Jesus offers. SO why do we insist on spending our money for that which does not satisfy? Why do we insist on devoting our lives to that which is empty? Why do we tirelessly chase after that which we will never catch? Why don't we turn to buy gold from Christ? Oh that Christ would open up our blind eyes!

You can see the further allusions to their cultures features that we mentioned earlier. They thought they were rich, prosperous and in need of nothing when in reality they were poor, blind and naked. Banking, eye salve and black wool were three features of their self-sufficiency. Now Jesus turns all three on their heads: turn to me for the buying of gold (banking), the covering of your nakedness (textiles) and the opening of blind eyes (salve). But the only condition – you must see that you are spiritually bankrupt, naked and blind. You must repent! Look at v.19:

<sup>19</sup> Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. <sup>20</sup>  
Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

What is the promise of v.20?

This verse is often preached as though Jesus were a homeless vagabond seeking shelter. He shamelessly knocks at the door hoping against all odds that those inside will heed his knock and open up to let him in for supper and a stay. With all due respect, this interpretation falls short on so many accounts. But rather than enumerate all its shortcomings, let me simply demonstrate what is going on here and the other will instantly seem ludicrous.

These are the words of Jesus intended to be a warning to those who are a part of the church of Laodicea – believers. They need to hear and heed the knock of Jesus. They are not unbelievers but believers who need to hear and heed the knock of Jesus.

Since these are the words of Jesus, they should immediately cause us to hearken back to his earlier words recorded in Luke 12:35:

<sup>35</sup> “Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, <sup>36</sup> and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks. <sup>37</sup> Blessed are those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will dress himself for service and have them recline at table, and he will come and serve them.

Do you see? Jesus is the master of the house who is coming home. The privilege is on those servants who are dressed and waiting for his arrival. They will welcome him home to find that he will gladly stoop to them and serve them at table. That is, he will dine with them. This is no doubt, an allusion by John to the marriage supper of the Lamb that is coming later in Revelation 19.

Will the church at Laodicea be waiting and eager to welcome the master home when he knocks?

Jesus' knock is a welcome sound to those who have ears to hear. "The Master is home!"

Jesus' knock will be sheer shame to those servants not found dressed and ready when he busts the door down like a thief.

And not only will the waiting and ready servants be granted to eat with the Master at the table, but they will be seated with him on his throne in the kingdom. They will rule with him. Look at v. 21:

<sup>21</sup> The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

**Conclusion:**

Church, the world is hawking its wares and fares.

"You need more money.

You need a financially secure future.

You need newer and nicer things.

You need the latest health aid and fitness craze.

You need to be moving up in the world."

And many in the church are buying it. So that slowly but surely, the culture is creeping into the church and deluding us. The world is changing the substance of what you need. It is turning passions and desires into actual felt-needs which morph into demands and expectations.

Many in the church believe that with all of their fiscal and worldly affluence they will be insulated from need.

The only thing you need and all that you truly need flows from him who is the beginning of God's creation.

If Jesus returned home today and knocked at the door would be ready to welcome him home? Or, would you be found shamefully distracted with all this world has to offer?