

Laodicea: The Worthless Church Revelation 3:14-22

We come to the last of the seven churches. We've looked closely at previous six:

- **Ephesus:** You have no love! (Like a very theologically-rooted church but cold)
- **Smyrna:** Be faithful in the face of suffering. (Like a 10/40 window church)
- **Pergamum/Thyatira:** Champion the truth in the face of error, and pursue holiness in an unholy context. (Like Youthful church that lacks discernment/liberal church lacks conviction)
- **Sardis:** Possess the reality of spiritual life. (Mega church in Bible Belt or Midwest)
- **Philadelphia:** Remain loyal to Christ by the power of Christ. (Urban store front)

Now we want to hear what the Spirit says to the church at Laodicea. (Like an affluent and apathetic church today)

- Christ rebukes them for **their smug self-sufficiency**, and tenderly appeals to them to **pursue wholehearted devotion to him**.

Before I pray, I want to do something different. We have my pastor friend Kerem Koc and his family with us today. Kerem is a pastor in Turkey, and on my trip there a few months ago we talked through these churches and visited these sites. I thought you should know him and pray for him, so I want him to come and share with us about his church (he can also tell you if my background information has been accurate).

- Questions...
- Pics... [Laodicea was located in the Lycus Valley along with the cities of Hierapolis (6 miles North) and Colossae (10 miles east)]

[Pray]

The message to the Laodiceans is very relevant for the church in the West today.

Affluence can lead to apathy.

These two often go together. They don't have to, but they often do.

Affluence and prosperity can make the church self-satisfied and "lukewarm" toward the things of God.

Economic prosperity can lead to a loss of Spirit dependency.

- We can view success has having a lot of money and people and big buildings, but forget that what God wants is our hearts, not our appearance of grandeur.

Christ addresses their breezy self-confidence in this last letter. It's a piercing report.

- How many of you love exams (or loved them)?
 - I dreaded some exams.
 - Others I didn't because the class was easy.
- For those difficult exams I also dreaded **the feedback**. Oh that hurt, right?
- **But what hurt the most was when you felt good about an exam, only to find out that you bombed it, receiving got a piercing report from the teacher, trampling all over your pride.**

Jesus has been writing a report on each of these churches.

And the Laodiceans would have assumed Christ would have praised them; they would have thought they aced his exam.

- “Surely, Jesus will commend us” – right? Look at us! We got it going on! No.

It reminds me of a report from Paul Vitz, comparing mathematical ability to the Koreans and the Americans in the late 1980’s. “A 1989 study of mathematical skills compared students in eight different countries. American students ranked lowest in mathematical competence and Korean students ranked highest. But the researchers also asked students to rate how good they were at mathematics. The Americans ranked highest in self-judged mathematical ability, while the Koreans ranked lowest. Mathematical self-esteem had an inverse relation to mathematical accomplishment.”

- So the Americans were terrible in Math but they felt good about how they were doing!
- “We think we’re doing the best!” But they were the worst.

So the Laodiceans. They thought they were “all that.”

- But they made Jesus want to vomit.

Why? Here’s why: They stopped singing, “I need thee every hour.”

You should never stop singing that song in the Christian life, no matter how gifted and experienced you may be. Apart from Christ, we can do nothing.

They were self-satisfied and self-sufficient, and therefore self-deceived.

- Even though there is no doctrinal error mentioned, this church receives Jesus’ most severe rebuke.
- Because our Lord hates pride.
- Our Lord is not pleased with half-hearted devotion, complacency and apathy.

#1: The Authoritative Introduction (3:14)

The mailman has now come to Laodicea, 45 miles SE of Philadelphia.

- Laodicea was located in the Lycus Valley along with the cities of Hierapolis (six miles North) and Colossae (ten miles east), with all three cities being part of Phrygia.
- Two important imperial trade routes converged here.
- The city was a wealthy commercial center, the richest in Phrygia.
- It was known for (1) **banking**; (2) the making of **clothing** (still today), especially local soft, black wool; and (3) a famous **medical school** with ointments for the **ears** and the **eyes**.

So keep these in mind. Laodicea was known for three features:

1. Textile industry.

- The making of clothes.

2. The finest medical college in Asia Minor.

- Eye salve was famous; they had this famous “Phrygian Powder” used for curing eye diseases (adding to the wealth).

3. The banking industry was enormous.

Laodicea was often chosen as **the major example of wealth**. Osborne notes:

- Coins from there depict cornucopias, a symbol of wealth and affluence.
- A man named Hiero bequeathed 2,000 talents (several million 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.
- The city boasted in its remarkable buildings, spas, gymnasium, a stadium with a nine hundred foot long track, and more.

So wealthy was the city that following a devastating earthquake in AD 60, Laodicea rebuilt itself without any assistance from Rome.

The city and church were alike.

- They saw themselves as self-sufficient.
- The city, “We don’t need Rome’s help,” and the church, “We don’t God’s help.”
- They were just fine all by themselves.
- They were badly deceived.
- Jesus says you are “Poor, blind, naked.”

This church was most likely started by Epaphras (Col 1:7; 4:12-15; Acts 19; He may have planted Hierapolis as well), who is commended in the Scriptures for his prayer life.

- No doubt the church started out with a humble heart toward God.
- These three churches were closely connected as **Colossians 4:12-16** demonstrate.

“The words of the ‘Amen’” – only place as a name.

- An echo of “the God of truth” (Isa 65:16)
- It also affirms Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises (1 Cor 1:20)
- Jesus is the “amen” (the “double amen” as we saw in John, “truly, truly.”)
- You can trust Jesus’ words!

“These are the words of the faithful and true witness”

- The unchanging witness is reliable.
- He is the ultimate witness.
- You can trust his words.

“The origin of God’s creation” – A statement of his deity

- This does not mean he was created, but rather, like we read in Colossians, **He is the ruler of creation and the church (Col 1:15ff)**
- There are a number of resemblances of this letter and Colossians; John may be calling their attention to it.
- **The self-satisfied Laodiceans thought they were in control of everything; but they were deceived.**
- **Jesus reminds them that he alone is sovereign.**

- He is the creator of all things, and the Lord of the new creation to come!
- Can the one who made all things, make them new?

The doctrine of Christ's Lordship should humble us.

- This is an antidote to pride and arrogance.
- Remember that Christ alone reigns and he gives us breath and life.
- We are dependent on him to bear spiritual fruit.

#2: The All-Knowing Evaluation (3:15-17)

When Jesus examines the Laodicean church, He sees nothing to praise or commend—not one single thing.

15-16: You are neither **cold** nor **hot**

- This is an often-misunderstood saying.
- Often it is taken that Jesus would rather you "**hate the gospel**" (**be cold**) than to be a **mediocre Christian (be lukewarm)**.
- That never made sense to me, even before I understood the context.
- Jesus doesn't prefer you to hate the gospel than to be mediocre.

How would the Laodiceans have heard it? That's the question we must ask.

The city had all but one thing: good water.

- Their source of water was **worthless** – despite all their wealth.
- **The water was so distasteful that visitors, and would often vomit after drinking it.**
- **Six miles north – Hierapolis was known for beautiful hot springs, hot healing waters. They were famous.**
- **Ten miles East: Colossae was known for its clear, cold water. It was the only place in the region where it was available.**
- **Laodicea had neither.**
- **They had to pipe in the water in from some five miles away.**
- **In doing so the water arrived lukewarm, and the minerals gave it a stench and made it distasteful.**
- **Even today the locals place water in jars to cool.**

The Point: Both cold water and hot water serve important purposes.

- **Hot Tub and Swimming Pool. (Kimberly's purchases!)**
- **Drinking water or hot tea. (Last week at Acropolis, "I bet the water isn't cold")**

Therefore, Jesus is saying, "**You are just like your water.**" **Worthless.**

- They were **ineffective**.
- **"You don't provide refreshment for the weary; nor do you bring healing to the sick."**
- They were **ineffective** and **distasteful** to the Lord.

17: What's behind all this? "You say I am rich"

- There's nothing wrong with being rich but they had grown self-sufficient; a great temptation of the wealthy.
- It's like our "In God we trust" printed on our dollars.
- The reality is, the more you have it, the harder it is to actually trust in God!!

17b: You don't see reality! "You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

- You are actually spiritually impoverished.

Five marks of their spiritual condition:

1. **Wretched**—miserable, a word used of devastated countries (not a wealthy city)
2. **Pitiable**— the object of extreme pity (*not* how the Laodiceans assessed themselves)
3. **Poor**— In a city that bragged of its wealth, commerce, and banking industry.
4. **Blind**—A dig at a city that prided itself in its med school and eye powder
5. **Naked**— Though they boasted in their famous wool.

Contrast this church with **Smyrna**: poverty "but you are rich" (Rev 2:9)

The church in Laodicea is similar to churches today that are wealthy and clothed beautifully, but are arrogant, condescending; not desperate for God and whose witness is absent.

It's possible to be wealthy and good-for-nothing spiritually.

#3: The Appropriate Exhortation (3:18-20)

Action is now required once the truth has been revealed.

Five Needs (I need thee every hour)

A. We Need Christ's Riches (18a)

18: "Buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich..."

Jesus speaks in a way that this commercially minded church could understand.

- "Forsake your other suppliers and buy from me"
- "All the suppliers in Laodicea cannot supply your ultimate needs, but I can!"
 - "As poor, yet making many rich" (6:10)
 - "He became poor that we may rich in him" (2 Cor 8:9)
 - "He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph 1)

If you have nothing, but have Christ, you have everything.
If you have everything but don't have Christ, you have nothing.

B. We need Christ's Righteousness (18b)

18b: "and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen"

- Their black wool was the big thing. People in the Roman Empire boasted in their Laodicean attire.
- **“Don’t go to Gucci! Don’t go to Dior, Ralph Laruen, Louis Vuitton. Come to Me.”**

This appeal is strong isn’t it, to us in the West, who like nice clothes?

- Which do you value most, your external appearance or your interior spiritual life?

Though they were decked out, Jesus said you are naked and shameful.

- (cf., robes of honor: Gen 41:42; Esth 6:6-11)
- **You need the garments of Christ!**
- **White clothes symbolize the imputed righteousness of the Savior and the righteous acts of the saints** (see 3:4-5,18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9,13-14; 19:8,14).

C. We need Christ’s remedy (18c)

18c: “and slave to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.”

- They boasted in their eye salve but the church church was blind to its spiritual condition.
- **Only the great physician had a cure for their blindness. (John 9)**
- I was blind but now I see!

So...

- The church was spiritually poor but Jesus has **gold**.
- The church was naked but Jesus has **clothes**.
- The church was blind but Jesus has **eye salve**.
- **“Come to me, I can supply you with real riches.”**
- **“Come to me, I can cover your shame with my righteousness.”**
- **“Come to me, I can give you spiritual sight.”**

It is a call for these Christians to return to Jesus.

- **It’s what we call “Spiritual renewal”**

D. We need Christ’s rebuke (19)

These are strong words but notice what motivated them: **his love**.

19: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.”

“I love” – here’s the heart behind the rebuke.

Two commandments:

- **“Repent”** (aorist, imperative).
 - **Change your actions right now, regarding your lack of reliance on me, and the silence of your testimony.**
- **“Be zealous”** (Present imperative)
 - Take on a new life.
 - Be zealous daily for me!

Transition: How can they suddenly change and be different?

Through **renewed communion** with him...

E. We Need Christ's Renewal (v. 20).

20: "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."

- This letter, like the other letters, is written to the church.
- **This is not an evangelistic text to outsiders.**
- This is not Paul at Mars Hill.

It's an invitation to Christians who in their self-sufficiency have ignored the Lord.

- It's the language of Song of Songs, when the Groom is knocking at the door of his bride. (Song 5:2)
- **Here is the Groom, saying to the Bride, let me come in!**
- **Christ the lover is appealing to the Bride.**

Notice while addressing the church it's also applied to individuals in the church, **"If anyone"** hears my voice...

- Is that you?
- **Have you ignored him? Is your heart not warm toward him?**
- **Let him in and enjoy fresh intimacy...**

"I will eat with him and he with me" ...

- **"Open the door to renewed intimacy with me. I haven't given up on you."**
- **To share a meal with someone in the ancient world was to share life with them. It's one of the reasons it's part of our small group dynamic.**
- **It was also a place for reconciliation and grace.**
- **Bartchy: "When people were estranged, a meal invitation opened up the way of reconciliation" A great idea for today!**
- **Jesus welcomed sinners to the table. And still does.**
 - He offers you reconciliation and renewed fellowship.
 - The greatest joy in this life is fellowship with Jesus.
- This invitation is a preview of the great Messianic feast to come!

#4: The Awe-Inspiring Conclusion (3:21-22)

²¹The 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. ²²He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' "

We have read of some remarkable promises in these churches, but Stott is correct in saying **"This prospect exceeds in glory all the other promises to the overcomer."**

A throne is the symbol of **authority** and **conquest**.

- **55 times** "thronos" is used in the NT.
- **41 times** in Revelation.
- Part of the reason it's used here is to provide a link with **Revelation 4-5**.

There is a **three-stage development** of the throne in the Bible (Osborne).

- In the OT, **Yahweh is on the throne in majesty and judgment.**
- In the Gospels, **Jesus as the Son of Man partakes of God's throne, also in majesty and judgment. (Matt 19:28; 25:31-36)**
 - Rev 4 – Yahweh on the throne
 - Rev 5 – Jesus in his redemptive work on the throne.
- Finally, in the NT, **the victorious saints share in the throne of glory and judgment**
 - Matt 19:28; 1 Cor 6:2; 2 Tim 2:12a, Rev 20:4

This is major motif: **Christus Victor.**

- **Christ is the overcomer. The Champion. (Col. 2:15; Phil 2:9)**

And through Him we overcome.

Through Him we will also reign.

And we will do this by emulating Him, and by relying on him, the ultimate overcomer...

- **From the perspective of the world, his story was folly...**
- **But from the perspective of heaven, it was the path to the throne.**
- **They crucified him, but he became the firstborn from the dead; and is seated on the throne in glory.**
- **And He shares that glory with those who have a *persevering witness*.**
- **That's who will reign with him.**

So, Welcome him. Fellowship with him. Love him. Rely on him.

See your every-hour need of him.

- **The One who became poor so that we might be rich in him.**
- **The One who was stripped so that we may be clothed in righteousness.**
- **The One who was wounded that we may be healed.**
- **The One who dines with sinners and calls us his bride.**
- **Look to this One: The Faithful and True Witness, the Amen, and find your spiritual renewal.**