

THE LETTER TO LAODICEA: “LUKEWARM”

Revelation 3:14-22

At first, the city was called Diospolis; and later, Rhoas. But in 260 B.C., King Antiochus II of Syria renamed the city Laodicea to honor his wife Laodice. Laodicea was located in the Lycus River Valley forty-five miles southeast of ancient Philadelphia. Situated on two great trade routes, Laodicea became a flourishing commercial center and acquired enormous wealth. That wealth was reflected in the city’s architecture, attitude, and amenities.

For example, while many cities of that era struggled to support even one performing-arts theater, Laodicea offered two; one with 8,000 seats and the other with 15,000 seats. And in wealthy Laodicea theater seats were inscribed with the names of their owners; similar to modern season ticket holders. Along with two theaters, Laodicea also had a 40,000-seat amphitheater, with room for an additional 15,000 seats on its north slope—a total of 55,000 seats, nearly the same seating capacity as Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles.

There were magnificent temples; public baths, spas, and gymnasiums; markets and stores; expensive art exhibits; a world-famous medical school; an auditorium for lectures and concerts; a bouleuterion or city council chambers; and streets lined with ornate columns and pedestals. In fact, Main Street in Laodicea was equipped with a subterranean sewer system that swept away waste water from homes and businesses. Laodicea was so wealthy that, when the city was devastated by an earthquake in 60 A.D., its residents refused all financial assistance from imperial Rome. “No thanks,” they said. “We are rich. We can do this alone. We don’t need or want your help.”

In antiquity Laodicea was especially known for three items: banks, fabrics, and eye-salve. The banks were a natural consequence of the city’s trade, tourism, and wealth. Laodicean fabrics were made from the glossy black wool of local sheep. The wool was used to make warm, waterproof garments that were highly prized and highly priced. Laodicean eye salve was developed by the city’s medical school and composed of ground stone mixed with water, then applied to the eyelids. Long before bifocals, contact lenses, and Lasik Surgery, people throughout the ancient world bought Laodicean eye salve to improve poor vision.

And yet, despite all of its wealth and civic pride, Laodicea had one glaring weakness. The city had no local water source. Water had to be transported via aqueduct from a hot springs near the city of Hierapolis, some six miles away. The water was so rich with minerals, especially calcium, that it frequently clogged the stone pipes in the aqueduct. Even worse, by the time the water reached Laodicea, it was neither cold nor hot but lukewarm. Imagine drinking a refreshing cup of chalky, lukewarm Laodicean water.

This, then, was the city of Laodicea. But what of its first Christian church? Laodicea was only nine miles from Colossae. When Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, he mentioned Laodicea four times; and in so doing, provided a brief description of the Laodicean congregation as it existed in 61 A.D. A small, thriving church. A church meeting in the home of a woman named Nympha. A church being served by Pastor Epaphras from Colossae. A Scripture-oriented, Christ-centered, Spirit-empowered church.

Sadly, move forward thirty-four years to the time of Revelation, and we find a remarkably different Christian congregation in Laodicea. A church of which Jesus had nothing good to say. A church which received one of the Savior's harshest rebukes: **"I am about to spit you out of My mouth,"** Revelation 3:16.

Indeed, as we read Christ's letter to the Laodiceans, we discover a Christian congregation barely distinguishable from its pagan community. Is that what Jesus Christ intended for His churches when He called His disciples "the light" of the world and "the salt" of the earth and commanded them to proclaim the Gospel to every nation? Of course not. Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, **"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world."** And John wrote in 1 John 2:15, **"Do not love the world or anything in the world."**

And yet, in less than two generations, the church in Laodicea came to share the characteristics of the city in which it resided. Did you notice that? The city claimed to be rich. So did its Christian church: **"You say, 'I am rich,' "** Revelation 3:12. The city refused help from its Lord Caesar. The Laodicean church refused help from the Lord Christ: **"You say, 'I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing,' "** Revelation 3:17. The city had lukewarm water. The Christian church in Laodicea had a lukewarm attitude toward Christ and His Word.

Lukewarm. What does lukewarm mean? In some respects it is almost easier to define lukewarm by what it isn't than by what it is; just as Jesus did in His letter to the Laodicean church. He said: **"You are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold,"** Revelation 3:16. Not hot. Not cold. But something in between. Tepid. Neutral. Uncommitted. Indifferent. Apathetic. Unenthusiastic. Passionless. Couldn't care less. And while lukewarm may be a fine temperature for a load of laundry, it is never acceptable in a relationship, and especially when that relationship is with the Lord Jesus Christ.

When writing His letters to the seven churches, Jesus followed a similar format; specifically: an address line; then a view of Himself particularly suited to that congregation's circumstances; then, if warranted, a commendation and rebuke; then a clear solution to congregational problems; then the call to overcome; and finally, the familiar invitation to hear and apply the message: **"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** Let's consider each of these elements in Christ's letter to the lukewarm Laodiceans.

First, the address line: “**To the angel of the church in Laodicea,**” Revelation 3:14. When you and I hear the phrase “church in Laodicea,” we almost immediately think of a physical building in a specific location—like the church at 208 11th Street East, Lemmon, South Dakota, 57638. Biblically defined, however, “church” is not a building; church is people, that is, the believing people of God.

The Greek word for “church” in Revelation 3:14 and throughout the New Testament is EKKLESIA. It literally means “to call out”. Those called out of the world to believe in Jesus Christ. Those called to eternal life and eternal hope. Those called by God’s grace, not by human works. And therefore those who owe everything they are as Christians, everything they have as Christians, and everything they anticipate as Christians to the power and working of God’s Spirit. And since this is true, how can Christians be lukewarm toward the God who, as Peter wrote, “**called you out of darkness into His wonderful light,**” 1 Peter 2:9?

So, even in the address line of His letter, Jesus reminded the church in Laodicea, and with it, the other six churches of Asia Minor; and through them, every other Christian church of every other age, that our very existence as Christians and Christian congregations is due solely to Almighty God. Without Him there would be no church in Laodicea and no church in Lemmon. Amid such undeserved love and grace, lukewarm Christianity has no place.

Second, the introduction: “**These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation,**” Revelation 3:14. What does “amen” mean? Far too often, perhaps, we associate this precious word with the end of a hymn; or the end of a prayer, sermon, or liturgical response. Only, in Scripture, the word *amen*—of Hebrew origin—does not mean “stop here” or “the sermon is finally over”. Rather, *amen* is a solemn affirmation of truth.

When teaching, Jesus frequently used the word *amen*—variously translated with phrases like “verily I say to you” or “truly I say to you” or “assuredly I say to you”. However, Jesus never used this word *amen* lightly or casually, but solemnly and purposefully. He was saying, “What I’m telling you is absolutely true, God’s own truth.” For example, Matthew 8:10, “**I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.**” Or Matthew 17:20, “**I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.**” Indeed, on many occasions Jesus used the word *amen* twice in the same sentence for double solemnity and double certainty; as in John 6:47, “**Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.**” Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior? Then you have everlasting life. You own it now. You will experience it later. And that is God’s own truth.

In His letter to the lukewarm Laodiceans, Jesus not only used the word *amen*, He called Himself **“the Amen, the faithful and true witness.”** In fact, the Greek is even more emphatic than the English translation; literally, “the Amen, the faithful witness, the true one.” Emphasis on faithful. Emphasis on true. Do you see the significance? Jesus Himself is absolutely faithful. Jesus Himself is the absolute truth. Everything written about Jesus in Scripture—His birth, suffering, death, and resurrection; the miracles He performed, the salvation He obtained, the promises and prophecies He fulfilled—is undeniably and irrevocably true.

And so Paul wrote of Jesus in 2 Corinthians 1:20, **“For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ. And so through Him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God.”** Every promise that God has made to us is confirmed, certain, and fulfilled in Christ. And if God is so faithful to us; if God daily and richly forgives our sins; if God protects, preserves, and provides for all our needs; if God is never lukewarm toward us, how can we be lukewarm toward Him? And so, from the outset of His letter, even with the introduction, Jesus was reminding the Laodiceans: ‘You are lukewarm. I am not. You are half-hearted. I am whole-hearted.’

Third, the commendation: There is none, is there? And the omission is glaring. To the church in Ephesus Jesus said, **“I know your hard work and perseverance,”** Revelation 2:2. To the church in Smyrna Jesus said, **“I know your afflictions and poverty,”** Revelation 2:9. To the church in Pergamum Jesus said, **“You remain true to My name,”** Revelation 2:13. To the church in Thyatira Jesus said, **“I know your deeds, your love and faith,”** Revelation 2:19. To the church in Philadelphia Jesus said, **“You have kept My word and have not denied My name,”** Revelation 3:8.

Only two of the seven churches in Revelation received no commendation from Jesus Christ: Sardis, a church that had gone to sleep spiritually; and Laodicea, a church that had grown lukewarm spiritually. Yet, even of sleepy Sardis Jesus said, **“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with Me, dressed in white, for they are worthy,”** Revelation 3:4. But of lukewarm Laodicea Jesus had nothing good to say at all. And that in itself underscores the way our faithful God views indifference toward Him.

Fourth, the rebuke: **“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other. So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of My mouth. 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,”** Revelation 3:17.

Here lies the reason for lukewarm Christianity; namely, the attitude that we have no ongoing need for Christ; that we have outgrown Christ; that other things, notably material

things, are more important than Christ and can easily replace Christ. And according to the letter of Jesus to Laodicea, the belief behind this self-indulgent indifference is based on a misunderstanding of true wealth and true self.

Jesus told the Laodiceans: **“You say, ‘I am rich. I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’”** Given the wealth in the city of Laodicea, this claim of the Laodicean church was likely true. The church did have wealth. It did have resources. It did have impressive statistics and fine furnishings and a rapidly growing membership. And over time, the Laodicean church apparently came to believe that having wealth was more important than having Jesus Christ—no different from modern prosperity gospel churches and prosperity gospel preachers like Kenneth Copeland, Creflo Dollar, and Joel Osteen. When a church service ended in Laodicea, which conversation was more likely and lively: talk about Jesus and His atoning sacrifice or talk about the latest art exhibit or the next sporting event at Laodicea’s 40,000-seat amphitheater?

And this is the deceptiveness of wealth; the belief that when one has money, he has the means to happiness, peace, and contentment. Only, money can’t buy happiness. Money can’t cure loneliness. Money can’t provide forgiveness and eternal life. God does not accept that type of currency. Only the **“blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin,”** 1 John 1:7.

Consequently, Jesus, the Amen, the ever faithful Lord, told the Laodiceans the truth about themselves; that is, who and what they truly were without Him. He said: **“But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked,”** Revelation 3:17. According to Scripture, this is true of all of us by nature. No matter how famous we are, by nature we are wretched. No matter how powerful we are, by nature we are pitiful. No matter how wealthy we are, by nature we are beggars. No matter how keen-sighted we are, by nature we are blind. No matter how well-dressed we are, by nature we are naked.

If you and I see ourselves as we are by nature; and if we understand that in pure, undeserved grace—without any merit or worthiness of our own—Jesus Christ laid down His priceless life to save us; how can we be lukewarm toward God? As we confessed this morning using Luther’s explanation to the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord; who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.”

Fifth, the solution: As Jesus explained, the solution to lukewarm Christianity is to repent; is to understand the limitations of earthly wealth and the lostness of human nature; and to find true riches in Christ. **“I counsel you,”** said Jesus, **“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,”** Revelation 3:18. And Jesus offers this counsel not to hurt us, but to help us; not to injure, but to heal; not because He doesn’t care, but because He does care. **“Those whom I love,”** He said, **“I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent,”** Revelation 3:19.

At times, all of us wish for a life free from problems and burdens. No disease. No loss. No pain. Yet, it is precisely when things go well for us—as happened in the church at Laodicea—that we are in the greatest danger of growing lukewarm toward God.

The Lord Jesus is never lukewarm toward us. He wants only the most personal of relationships with us; to be in our hearts and homes and families and marriages and relationships. And so He said: **“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,”** Revelation 3:20. This is not a TV-dinner relationship. This is a feast that will last through time and eternity. **“I stand at the door and knock.”**

**“He who has an ear,
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