

Laodicea: The Reality of the Lukewarm Church

Revelation 3:14-22

To the Church in Laodicea

14 “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.

15 “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 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. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. 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. 21 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. 22 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Laodicia

Be sure to read some of Austin's study notes about the city of Laodicea. This was a city that was known for wealth, rich industry, and medicine, and a spirit of self-reliance. The background of Laodicea is very important for understanding why Christ use the imagery that he uses to address the church.

The church at Laodicea had a reputation as an “I got this” church. They likely had had good lives that seemed well put together to the outside world. This should very familiar to an average American Christian. Compared to the lives of Christians in much of the world, we have lives that are so well put together that we often forget how badly we need Christ. One life group member summarized American Christianity very well: “I don't think I'm like most Christians. I'm the kind of Christian that knows that I need Jesus every minute of every day.” Too often to we forget how poor, wretched, blind, and naked we are unless the grace of Jesus is upholding us every minute of every day.

“Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. You say ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,’ not realizing that you are

wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” – Rev. 3:16-17

The imagery of lukewarm Christians making Christ sick was always a powerful one as I was growing up in faith. It was typically said that Jesus was telling us that it is better to be “on fire” for him, or cold and unmoved to him than to be on the fence. Upon further reflection, Jesus is not exactly telling us to get excited or turn against him. What Jesus is saying is that our wholehearted submission is healthy and refreshing, but our devotion to ourselves is sickening and putrid. Jesus is not greatly concerned with our outward appearance of having things together, our outward shows of excitement, or our self-serving appearances of dignity. Jesus is interested in our hearts being fully and gladly devoted to himself. John Stott remarked many years ago at Princeton University “Commitment without reflection is fanaticism in action; but reflection without commitment is the paralysis of all action.”¹

- How do you maintain steady, wholehearted dependence on Christ without flaming out or becoming cold in your faith?

One of the remarkable things about the way Jesus speaks to us is that although he is God, he speaks on a level that we can understand. He also speaks truth in a manner that is both blunt and loving. The way He speaks to Laodicea is certainly not an introduction that any group of Christians would want from Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, it is a message to which the people could relate and understand. Each one of the negative traits assigned to the church has an immense spiritual significance. For example, people who trust in material wealth are spiritually poor. People who take pride in fine clothing are often spiritually naked. Blindness in particular has huge spiritual implications in all of the Gospels. The effects of sin on the lives of people often leave them too blind to see Jesus or know what true righteousness looks like.

John MacArthur describes the church at Laodicea as the last and worst of the seven churches addressed by Jesus.² The church Laodicea has neither a positive word said about the church OR faithful people within the church. The message of Jesus to the church is not an encouragement, but a call to complete repentance from their sad state. Jesus uses lots of imagery to describe the spiritual state of the church at Laodicea that corresponds to things they would know from their local geography, politics, and economy. Some of these include lukewarm water that will make you sick, eye salve, garments, wealth, and the forced boarding of conquering military guests. In all of Jesus’ comments, however, he does not come across as the harsh overlord of Rome, but as the kind and gentle conquering shepherd who desires to

¹ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 114.

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Revelation 1-11* (Chicago, Moody Publishers, 1999), 132.

give good things to his sheep (Revelation 3:19-21)

- How are we able to use experiences that are common to our culture to call people to the Gospel of Jesus?
- Does Jesus approach to the church at Laodicea strike you as harsh, loving, or both? How?
- Can you identify with the wealth or busy-ness of Laodicea? How does self-sufficiency destroy our ability to lean on Christ?

Jesus is a zealous and conquering disciplinarian. He is also someone who stands and knocks, patiently waiting for us to open the door to him so that we can enjoy fellowship, intimacy, and the good fruits of communion with Him.

- How do you reconcile the harsh nature of Jesus with the gentle nature of Jesus?
- What is the significance of eating a meal with Jesus? Is this something you desire?