

Look! Listen! - And Overcome!

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

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

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Look! Listen! – And Overcome!

“Laodicea: The Peril of the Middle Road”

-or-

“First Christless Church of Laodicea”

Lord's Day Morning

January 20, 2008

Pastor Jeff Crippen

“Complacency is the deadly enemy of spiritual progress.” A.W. Tozer

“When I find someone who is settled down too snugly into this world and its system, I am forced to doubt whether he has ever truly been born again.” A.W. Tozer

NKJ 1 John 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

NKJ Revelation 3:17 "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' -- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked --

“A dog that follows everybody is of no good to anybody.” Vance Havner

“A soft and sheltered Christianity, afraid to be lean and lone, unwilling to face the storms and brave the heights, will end up fat and foul in the cages of conformity.” Vance Havner

NOTE: Read a brief biography of Vance Havner at –

Sermon Text: Revelation 3:14-22

“When we are best at ease, when all things go with us according to our will and pleasure, then we are commonly furthest from God.” Hugh Latimer

“The calm which puts us to sleep may be more fatal than a storm which keeps us wide awake.” William S. Plumer

“Christ will have all of me or He will have none of me.” Anon

“You cannot serve God and money.” The Lord Jesus

Introduction

“The middle of the road is where most accidents happen.” Keep to the right and away from that middle ground. At a junction in life, it is always best to go right or left than to take the middle way. Let our yes be yes and our no be no.

These are words of wisdom that the church at Laodicea had failed to heed. In a very few years following our Lord’s earthly ministry, and even while the Apostle John still lived – this church came into such a pathetic state that we do not know if we should call it a church at all, except that our Lord addresses it as such.

Listen then in full to the risen Christ’s words to the Laodiceans –

NKJ Revelation 3:14 " And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ' These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:

15 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

17 "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' -- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked –

18 "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

19 "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore 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 dine with him, and he with Me.

21 "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame 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." "

I. The Place Itself

“You make me sick.” Those are pretty harsh words to speak to someone. Who wants to be on the receiving end of that kind of thing? Yet this is the very statement Christ delivers to

Laodicea. Notice that this letter contains not one single word of commendation. Not one. There was not one good, commendable quality to be found there.

And yet – never forget this major theme of The Revelation – *things are not what they appear to be*. What were the appearances outwardly in respect to this church? Well, apparently they were –

- Rich
- Wealthy
- Had need of nothing

At least this is their estimation of themselves.

This seventh letter is particularly troublesome to me – and I suspect to you as well. I say this because surely we here in North America live in perhaps the most materially prosperous and easy conditions history has ever known. So that surely we are in great danger of being *Laodiceans*.

We should pray that the Lord would use His word now to expose any and every resemblance to that lukewarm place to us and lay repentance heavily on us if necessary. No one wants to be a Laodicean – yet how many have ended on that middle road! We live in the most prosperous and easy – yet surely we are foolish if we fail to see

that such conditions also mean that *we live in the most perilous of times*. Times in which the slightest ripple in our hot-tub of comfort will excuse us from taking up our Bibles, from being in fellowship on the Lord’s Day, from prayer. Dangerous, dangerous times, you see.

“Perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to the church at the end of the 20th century than this. It describes vividly the respectable, nominal, rather sentimental, skin-deep religiosity which is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity is flabby and anemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion.”
John Stott, What Christ Thinks of the Church

Alright then, the town itself. Here is a summary taken from the Holman Bible Dictionary

“A city in southwest Asia Minor on an ancient highway running from Ephesus to Syria ten miles west of Colossae and six miles south of Hierapolis. Christian communities existed in all three cities (Col. 2:1; 4:13-16), though the one in Colossae is the best known. Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16) which has not survived, though some scholars have attempted to identify this missing letter with either of the Books of Ephesians or Philemon.”

NKJ Colossians 4:16 Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea.

“Laodicea was well known in the ancient world for its wealth. The extent of its wealth is illustrated by the fact that Laodicea was rebuilt without the financial help of Rome after the disastrous earthquake of A.D. 60. Laodicea earned its wealth in the textile industry in the production of black wool and in the banking industry.

Laodicea was also known for its medical school which concocted a spice nard for the treatment of ears and an eyesalve. The major weakness of Laodicea was its lack of a water supply. This need was met by bringing water six miles north from Denizli through a system of stone pipes (another sign of Laodicea's wealth).

Laodicea is best known today to readers of Revelation where Jesus criticized Laodicea, using imagery drawn from its daily life (Rev. 3:14-22). First, Jesus said Laodicea is neither cold (like the cold, pure waters of Colossae) nor hot (like the therapeutic hot springs of Hierapolis). Laodicea is lukewarm and provides neither refreshment for the spiritually

weary nor healing for the spiritually sick (Rev. 3:15-16).

Despite their apparent spiritual uselessness, the Laodiceans were claiming a spiritual wealth equal to their material wealth; and further, they were claiming to have acquired both by their own efforts. In reality, however, the Laodiceans, while they may have had material wealth, were spiritually poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17)--an obvious reference to the textile and banking industry and medical school of Laodicea. According to Jesus, what the Laodiceans needed more than anything else was the true gold, white (not black) garments, and eyesalve that only Christ could give (Rev. 3:18). A true spiritual foundation is laid only in Christ, not human effort.”

Phil Logan

II. The Physician's Credentials and Diagnosis

If you go to your doctor's office, you will normally see hanging on his wall his medical diploma and credentials. Why? Well, we want to know that here is a person we can entrust ourselves to – that he is competent to make the right diagnosis.

But there is in all of us – myself included – this tendency to *self-diagnosis*. This false confidence in our

own blind eyes to see clearly, to see things that we really have no ability to see. Surely if our Lord told us anything it is that we are bent toward having the log in our own eye, oblivious to it, yet ready to zero in on that speck in someone else's. Sin has a blinding aspect.

So right off, the Lord Jesus presents these Laodiceans with His divine credentials. He is –

“The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God.”

There is emphasis in this presentation of –

- Truth/Reliability
- Authority

That is to say,

- Christ *can* be believed – He is the Truth. His Word is *Amen* – true. He is perfectly faithful and gives only true testimony. What He says to these Laodiceans, therefore, is undiluted truth, untainted by any hint of error or misjudgment. AND -
- Christ *must* be believed – He is the chief of all the creation of God

NKJ Colossians 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. 18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

NOTE: How ironic that we Unfaithful creatures so often sit in judgment upon Christ's Word! We elevate our self-evaluation above His estimation of us. And we usually then end up thinking rather highly of ourselves. This is a dangerous and yes, wicked thing to do – to not trust the Great Physician.

The Physician's Diagnosis vs The Patient's Diagnosis

NKJ Revelation 3:15 "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. 17 **"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' -- and do not know that you**

are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked --

I wonder – we must wonder – How does He who is Amen, the True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God – How does HE estimate us? Let me give you an example. I have changed enough details in the following account so that the identity of the particular church is obscured. But the essence of this account was taken from a church website. I wonder, I wonder how this self-evaluation of one church would compare with Christ's evaluation of that same church??

Thus, First Church was born.

Under the leadership of our first pastor, we saw continued growth through an expanded Sunday School and the construction of an educational building that could seat 750 people. This education space quickly doubled in capacity with further construction efforts. First Church sponsored their own mission in three years later, forming a daughter church.

That same year the congregation called another pastor who headed the "Joining Hands to Build" campaign to provide a 1,000-seat sanctuary, including a bell tower, library, bridal and music suites, pipe organ, adult Sunday School department and all the furnishings and equipment. The building program cost \$1,386,745 and was completed in three years.

Pastor Jones served as First Church's fourth pastor, staying for 9 years. During this time, First Church was honored by a well-known Christian publication as having the fastest growing Sunday School in our state. After several years of radio broadcasting, First Church pursued another avenue to spread God's love to airing its first video broadcast on cable TV.

In 25th year of its history, the church completed a building program with the dedication of the Family Life Center. This \$1.2 million facility included two handball courts, a basketball court, running track, weight room, ceramics room, offices and education space. Due to the generous outpouring of support by First Church's membership, the congregation burned the note for the FLC in 1984. First Church further expanded its ministry in 1985 when the church announced the opening of First Church Christian School, offering education for grades K-3 through eighth. Over \$100,000 was raised in one month for the \$400,000 property.

Growth continued as the State Baptist Convention recognized First Church as one of the top churches in the state. This honor also included being named the top contributor to a well-known charity. The Executive Committee of our state's denominational Convention honored First Church as one of the top twenty churches in the state in baptisms. Since that time, First Church has consistently been in the top one percent of the state's churches in baptisms and giving.

Our fifth pastor began his ministry at First Church. He introduced "Era of Decision" to carry the church into the 21st century. This

plan included a Christian Life Ministry Team, ministry to widows, training for decision counselors, an Intercessory Prayer Ministry and a Long Range Planning Committee.

First Church built a prayer chapel in April of 1991, and within eight months, 605 prayer warriors were using the facility and had completed 3,473 hours of prayer. Other new areas of ministry opened up during this time, including an expanded Media Ministry and the Crisis Pregnancy Center.

In 1991, a prestigious church-growth publication recognized First Church as one of the 210 fastest growing churches in North America in worship attendance. This commendation placed First Church in the top one percent of more than 400,000 churches that reported a gain of one hundred or more people. First Church's consistent growth led to the formation of divorce, cancer and co-dependency support groups to provide godly counsel to people in the community during times of crisis. Dual Sunday School classes began in 1992 as a result of the continued growth.

First Church's cable brought increased programming and heightened audience appeal. First Church Christian School expanded and offered classes through the twelfth grade. With the purchase of property, the middle and high schools moved to new facilities with a cafeteria, library, auditorium, gymnasium and sports stadium.

When a natural disaster struck, First Church opened its doors immediately. The Family Life Center became a shelter where 250 evacuees were housed, clothed and fed.

First Church coordinated over 5,400 workers from twenty-one states. These teams cleaned up over fifty flooded homes, and this ministry continued through September of 1995. AWANA and Upward basketball began in 1994 as ministry opportunities for children and their families. Since that time, the Upward program has expanded to include soccer, football, baseball and cheerleading.

In February of 1998, the pastor called the membership to forty days of prayer. Later that year, the pastor, staff and deacons unanimously recommended a Master Growth Plan that included a 2,250-seat Worship Center and a 300-seat Chapel to provide space for "Future Generations." First Church celebrated with a groundbreaking ceremony in May of the following year.

Now, it is not our intent to condemn all these things. In themselves, nothing named here is sinful. We would hope that this church has done much good.

But it is our intent to simply ask this question –

"Could Laodicea have been a similar church? Is it possible that church could do all of these things, publish raving reviews of its accomplishments and wealth and size, and yet in Christ's faithful and true and authoritative judgment be, in fact, wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked"

Because surely we must, if anything else in this letter to Laodicea – surely

we must be warned of the danger of making our own evaluations of ourselves and our accomplishments.

We who tend to logs in our eyes.

I know nothing more about this particular church than it has said of itself in its own evaluation. But I can soberly ask this question – *Tell me about the spiritual condition of your people. Tell me about what goes on in their homes and marriages. About the divorce rate in your church. About your practice of church discipline. Tell me, can you see if Jesus is precious to you?*

Do we see in this example something of the danger Laodicea had fallen prey to? What condition would we be in if Christ had permitted those kinds of things to happen here among us? Or, perhaps we could ask this question of ourselves –

“Do we find ourselves envying Laodicea? We wonder, how many of the other churches in Asia looked with a jealous eye at her?”

We must soberly look at this stark contrast once more –

Laodiceans – we are rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing....

Christ – you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

The Emperor’s Clothes

Do you see the irony? They thought they had clear sight – but they were spiritually blind. They fancied that they were wealthy and had no needs at all – *when in fact, as we shall see, Christ Himself was on the outside of their church!!* They should have been ashamed, as ashamed as if they were literally naked in public view. Like the fabled emperor, they paraded their garments but Christ saw their nakedness.

In Need of Nothing?

Just consider this statement – *“I have need of nothing.”* What kind of thinking and condition must exist for a person – a professing Christian, no less – to say such a thing? In need of nothing? In contrast, the Apostle Paul Himself says *“wretched man that I am.”* But these Laodiceans apparently regarded themselves as having arrived further than the Apostle – *or even further than Christ.* Christ was poor, naked, no where to lay his head – yet he desires none of the things the Laodiceans prided themselves in.

In need of nothing? What does that statement say about a person’s heart?

Among other things, it says that they are complacent, self-satisfied – and, yes – *bored*. No needs, therefore – no desires. “I do not need anything, therefore I do not desire anything.” Which is to say –

- Such a person has no desire for Christ,
- Has no desire for heaven,
- Has no issues with the wickedness of this world – else he would hunger and thirst for righteousness,

This is, you see, a terrible, terrible condition to be in. *I have need of nothing*. Such a person and such a church in reality –

“is in need of everthing!”

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I need fear no evil, because it really isn’t such a bad place after all. No need for You, Lord, to accompany me here. I’m fine.”

III. Is Someone at the Door?

The 20th verse of this chapter is one of the most-quoted verses in the Bible, and like most “most-quoted verses” it is mostly quoted entirely out of context and therefore mis-quoted. It is normally used in application to the complete unbeliever – an evangelistic appeal of Christ to the unsaved man –

behold I stand at the door of your heart and knock. Open up and I will come in and save you. That is the typical application. And perhaps it is not absolutely wrong – for surely there is a high likelihood that this Laodicean church had few – if any – truly regenerate people in it.

But surely we see that *this statement appears in the context of Christ’s letter to a professing Christian church!* He is standing OUTSIDE this church. The door is shut to Him! Hear it –

NKJ Revelation 3:19 "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore 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 dine with him, and he with Me.

“Evidently Jesus is standing not at the door of the heart, but at the door of the church at Laodicea. That church had become unfaithful. That church had cast Him out. He was now standing outside. Within, however, there are those whom He loves and whom He would rebuke and chasten that they may come to repentance.”
[Hoeksema]

So that the image we are given is that of, well – here we are gathered in this sanctuary to worship Christ – *and He*

is shut out of the building, the doors locked to Him!!! The church is carrying on without Christ. Sensing no need, no lack, no problem at all – quite complacent that all is well. Surely the enemy had to have been proud of his work in that town. How many of such a congregation do not know Him, have never known Him – yet are caught up in the motions of Christless religion? Only Christ knows that.

And do you notice something else? *Christ is not just standing at this church's door. No, He is knocking.* The question is, does anyone in that place have an ear to hear His knock so that they see what is happening, go out to the door and let Him enter? And did you notice that the Lord does more than just knock –

“Not only that [knocking], but – as is evident from the next clause – He not only knocks again and again but He also calls...”

The Love of Christ

One of the things that I find remarkable in all this is that 19th verse. Hear it once more –

NKJ Revelation 3:19 "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

“Is there anything more wonderful in the entire Bible than this, that to these lukewarm people, with whom the Lord is so thoroughly disgusted that He is about to spew them out of His mouth, He now addresses Himself in these words: ‘As many as I love, I reprove and chasten...’”. [Hendriksen]

Look there at that liberal, Bible-denying compromised “church.” Now, some are no doubt hopelessly apostate so that they are no church at all and Christ departed from even knocking at their door a long time ago. But here is this church – this sad, pathetic, worldly bunch of blind, naked people who thought so highly of themselves and who had thus shut Christ right out from among them. Does it not amaze you that Christ expresses His love for them still?

In fact, is He perhaps telling them that because He loves them, He intends to rebuke and chasten them? To apply some pretty stinging stripes to their backside to bring them ‘round? Thus His call to them – be zealous – repent!! Don’t delay!

Is this not the only reason we can hope to persevere to the end? To overcome the world? That Christ so loves His own that He will faithfully rebuke and chasten us – that He will come to our door and start knocking? This is a remarkable thing, you see.

And what happens if anyone hears Him and opens that door? Here is this child of His, this straying sheep, this pathetic flock that has become so soiled by the world that they well, *make Him sick*. Here they are. How haughty and boastful and high-minded they have been. Oh man – how can we open the door!! Perhaps we had better hide and hope that He goes away??

But look at His intent for such –

“I will come in to him and will dine with him and he with Me.”

And furthermore, to such erring children who repent and open the door and overcome –

“I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne...”

Why would He still want to eat with a Laodicean like me, let alone allow me to sit down with Him on His throne for ever and ever. Yet this is His promise – even to Laodicea. You see then that as long as we hear His knock, it is never too late to open the door in repentance.

Conclusion – The Great Danger of Final Apostasy

Listen to this challenge from Pastor Herman Hoeksema –

“But will the church of Laodicea listen and heed this counsel of her Lord? We do not receive the impression that she will. Of course, she would return only by the power of the grace of her Lord Who is writing this letter to her. But there seems to be very little hope. Time and again in the history of the church we find that there is a return from apostasy and a quickening by the power of the grace of Christ. But naturally, the time will come that the church will repent no more and when only judgment [ie, a spewing out of His mouth] can be expected. Throughout the letter we get the impression that such is the condition of the church in Laodicea.

Notice, in the first place, that the announcement of impending judgment upon the church as a whole is unconditional and absolute. In the other letters the threat of judgment was always contingent upon impenitence. If they would not repent, the Lord would visit them with His punishment. But here the judgment and punishment seem inevitable.”

So, it is perhaps something like the Lord calling Lot to come out of Sodom before He consumes all who live there.

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore and repent.’ The thought is evidently that

even in the most miserable church of Laodicea there are still some of Christ's true people. They have perhaps fallen asleep, overcome by the deadening atmosphere which is prevailing in the church of Laodicea. And the Lord comes to them with His admonition to wake up to new zeal and to repent. They must manifest themselves as His people. They must wake up to the situation. And being zealous, they must witness against the unfaithfulness of the church."

And so we see the ever present danger of Christ's people being lulled into spiritual complacency and lukewarmness by the ever-present form of outward, nominal Christianity – by Christless Christianity. It is present, and it would have us become just like its citizens. We must overcome it and not yield to it.

Beware then, the spell of *Christless Christianity*. We breathe poison air in these days. *"Watch and fight; overcome and be faithful to the end! Have no part with the church that lives in self-sufficiency and has no need of anything. Only in going out to our Lord Jesus Christ shall we be satisfied with his friendship. Watch, therefore, and be zealous!"* [Hoeksema] – lest Laodicea swallow you up.