

“APOCALYPSE SOON”**“Laodicea: The Lukewarm Church – Part I” (Revelation 3:14-22)**

The final epistle on this circuit of the seven churches was sent to the church at the city of Laodicea. This church has the unenviable distinction of making the Head of the Church feel nauseated about its spiritual state. Consequently, He sends them a stinging rebuke. There is a marked difference from the previous letter. Writing to the church at Philadelphia the Lord has nothing bad to point out, whereas writing to the church at Laodicea He has nothing good to say. Although Christ finds nothing to commend in them, the members at Laodicea were clearly busy commending themselves. Keathley observes,

“This church illustrates and speaks to the church in our time, our modern period of materialism, consumerism, self-sufficiency, do-your-own-thing kind of independence and individualism, religiosity, and apostasy.”

Of the seven cities in the letters, Laodicea was situated the furthest to the southeast. It was the chief city of Phrygia sitting in the fertile Lycus Valley making up a tri-city combination with Colossae, ten miles east and Hierapolis, six miles to the North. The rivers around Laodicea were inadequate for its water supply because they were often polluted and even dried up at times. Colossae was known for its pure, cold water whereas Hierapolis was famed for its hot therapeutic springs. Because of a shortage of clean water in the locality of the city, water was pumped in from Colossae and Hierapolis through aqueducts. Often by the time the water reached Laodicea from Colossae it was neither cold and from Hierapolis it was neither hot, but somewhat lukewarm or tepid.

The city of Laodicea was also located at a pivotal point on a major trading road running from 40 miles east at Ephesus to Phrygia in the east. Another major road from Pergamos and Sardis bisected south to the coast. Major movements of commerce and people flowed in and out of the city daily. Its strategic location made it a wealthy, powerful, and proud city. Its banks flourished and financed most of the commercial enterprise in the region around it. The city constructed great theatres, a huge stadium, shopping centres, and lavish public baths. Indicative of Laodicea’s self-sufficient pride and wealth was when an earthquake destroyed much of the city in 60 AD the city refused any assistance from Rome. They boasted that they had “*need of nothing.*” They rebuilt it in even greater splendour than before.

A significant feature of its trading power was the wool industry. Laodicea produced soft but glossy black wool that was extremely valuable. It was used to weave carpets, which were then prized as exports. To add to this, the city produced commercially a medicinal eye salve product from its famous medical school. People came from all over the empire to purchase this product, which was known to bring a measure of comfort and healing.

(1) THE CORRESPONDENT TO THIS CHURCH (v14)

Jesus Christ introduces Himself here as, “*the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God.*” (v14) The word “*Amen*” is a Hebrew expression tied into a root word meaning truth. Isaiah calls God “*the God of truth,*” literally, “the amen God” (Isaiah 65:16). Jeremiah gives us an inspired commentary on the word as, “*Even the prophet Jeremiah said, Amen: the LORD do so: the LORD perform thy words which thou hast prophesied*” (Jeremiah 28:6a). So the word in this context

justly emphasizes the Deity of Christ and the idea of His truth and faithfulness. So every time Jesus Christ speaks here, He speaks as God who is perfectly accurate and absolutely trustworthy. It is as foolish for any person at Laodicea to think they can hide their deeds from God like Adam and Eve tried in Eden.

This church seemed to be the most in need of a realistic and truthful spiritual examination. They believed they were, “*rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing,*” but this was far from the reality, “*and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.*” (v17) Religion has a powerful ability to delude self. Keathley notes,

“As the “Faithful and True Witness,” He stripped them and so also us of all our false appearances and pretentiousness, rationalizations and excuses. It stresses the need in each of us for honest examination followed by an honest to God confession that demonstrates a genuine desire for a change of life. It would further teach us the need to be in His Word which reveals our true condition (Hebrews 4:12). The Lord said, “*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.*” (John 17:17).”

(2) THE CONDEMNATION OF THIS CHURCH (v15-17)

Christ immediately condemns this church by identifying four major areas of concern that they had lost – their vigour, their values, their vision, and their vesture. Now, it is not clear whether Christ is addressing a church filled with tares only or a church with a mixture of tares like Judas and backslidden believers like Lot. There are a number of things mentioned in this section that could apply to both groups.

(a) **VIGOUR** (v15-16) – He points firstly to their spiritual temperature as being lukewarm, “*I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot*” (v15). Like the tepid local water supply at Laodicea, the people in the church were spiritually lukewarm. Lukewarm water is a result of mixing hot and cold. So spiritual lukewarmness is a similar mixing of the coldness of sin with the heat of truth, which is compromise. The members at Laodicea were clinging onto a nominal, anaemic form of religion. They were trying to live like Lot with one foot in the world and one in the church forgetting the warning of Christ, “*No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon*” (Matthew 6:24).

A lukewarm Christian is apathetic, complacent, compromised, comfortable, and doesn't see his need. He doesn't take sin, holiness, and sacrificial service seriously. Tragically, his self-satisfied and carnal life serves to actually turn people away from Christ. Like Lot who “*seemed as one that mocked unto his sons-in-law*” (Genesis 19:14), the lukewarm has no testimony, but is as salt that has “*lost his savour*” and “*is thenceforth good for nothing*” (Matthew 5:13). Judged by Christ's standard, Laodicea was good for nothing. When a Christian lives hypocritically the devil is only too delighted to point this out to the unbelieving world. Unsaved people discern much more than you often give them credit for. As the poet wrote,

**“The gospel is written a chapter a day
By deeds that you do and words that you say.
Men read what you say, whether faithless or true.
Say, what is the gospel according to you?”**

It is not that a cold-hearted member is good, but Christ prefers, *“I would thou wert cold,”* as this coldness would make him shiver and at least reveal his need of warmth. Barnhouse observed,

“So the Lord is saying, ‘If instead of being lukewarm, you were so cold that should you feel that coldness, then the very feeling of your need might drive you to the true warmth, but now in your lukewarmness, you have just enough to protect yourselves against a feeling of need.’”

The word *“boil”* here is a Greek word, which means, “boiling hot.” A believer is meant to have a burning heart full of the love of Christ and to be, *“fervent in spirit”* (Romans 12:11). They should be like the disciples on the road to Emmaus who testified, *“Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the scriptures?”* (Luke 24:32) It is worth noting that it was the word of God that warmed their hearts. That is what the Laodiceans needed – to be revived in a radical spiritual renaissance by the Word of God.

It is easy to fool many people as to your spiritual state, but you can never fool Jesus Christ. The Master’s startlingly response in metaphorical language to lukewarm compromising Christianity is, *“because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth”* (v16). This word *“spue”* means to vomit or spit out. This graphic response is utilised to show the deep disgust and loathing the Saviour has for such a spiritual life. He is far from indifferent! The members of the church at Laodicea would easily understand this metaphor, as they knew experientially the nauseating reaction to tepid, lukewarm water.

(b) **VALUES** (v17-18a) – Christ also sees that the members of the church had a wrong understanding of spiritual values. They boasted, *“I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing”* when in reality, *“thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor.”* This “affluenza” is a lack of discernment, which is another characteristic of lukewarm Christianity. It is the equating of material success with spiritual success. As MacArthur says,

“It is the sickening condition of thinking you are spiritually rich when you’re bankrupt, of thinking you are beautiful when you are wretched, of imagining you are to be envied when you are to be pitied, of believing you see clearly everything when you see nothing.”

Clearly, in a wealthy, proud, and materialistic city like Laodicea the spirit of the city had permeated the thinking of the church members. Their wealth gave them a false sense of security, success, and satisfaction. They looked at all the external measurements of success and crowed that they *“have need of nothing.”* They likely boasted in their beautiful buildings, financial surpluses, large membership rolls, sophisticated choirs, social status of members, abilities, and diversity of dynamic ministries. Such people pray lukewarm prayers, sing in a lukewarm manner, listen to lukewarm sermons, and exchange lukewarm words with one another. It is not utter indifference to Christianity but as Morgan says, “the Cross is not denied, but it is not vital.”

Too many believers today feel the same way. They look at their social status, pension and savings, impressive homes and vehicles and say in their heart, *“I have need of nothing.”* They don’t feel the need to trust God or put Him first, as they are confident their material possessions can get them out of every situation. Rather they treat God as someone incidental to their lives. Worship, prayer, and Bible study are simply options to be exercised at their convenience. Christianity is just a “holy hobby” that they take up and cast aside at will. Their church is

effectively a “Religious Country Club” that exists for their benefit.

However this letter proves, a church may have impressive statistics but at the same moment Christ declares that He wants to “*spue thee out of my mouth*” (v16). The standard Christ uses to assess this church is different from the scale they use. Jesus warned, “*without me ye can do nothing*” (John 15:5) but the Laodicean Bible Version was, “*without me ye can do everything!*” Instead of being rich as they thought, this church was, “*wretched, and miserable, and poor.*” The word “*poor*” here means absolutely “*destitute*” or “*impoverished.*” It is used to describe beggars seeking a few crumbs to survive on. Keathley points out,

“Those who try to find happiness and security in the details of life are like beggars trying to exist on crumbs while, as we see in verse 20, Christ stands at the door inviting us to come in out of the cold and dine with Him in fellowship.”

(c) **VISION** (v17b) – The Saviour makes clear that this church had lost its vision as they are now, “*blind.*” These people could not see spiritual reality. They only see the material as significant and are blinded to real eternal spiritual riches. In their lukewarm self-satisfied state they cannot see their sin and who they were in the mirror of God’s Word. They could not see the Lord was standing outside the door, but assumed He was with them. Such people cannot see the opportunities for service and evangelism around them. Peter points to this type of declining spiritual vision in believers who are not growing in the Lord (2 Peter 1:5-9). They are like Samson who, “*wist not that the LORD was departed from him*” (Judges 16:20).

A classic example of the spiritual blindness was in the days of Jeremiah the prophet. The young prophet was sent by God to preach a sermon at “*the gate of the LORD’s house*” to those who enter to “*worship the LORD*” (Jeremiah 7:2). This message was not to be preached to pagans or the godless rabble but to the most outwardly religious in Israel. These worshippers were trusting in “*lying words*” and trusted in a kind of superstitious temple creed (Jeremiah 7:4). The temple had a long history of God’s preservation and protection. These people had confidence in tradition, location, and in their outward practices, but not in God Himself. They thought by going through the motions of religious worship at the temple would absolve them from God’s judgment against their sins at home and in the community.

Jeremiah pointedly warns them that trusting in “*lying words*” ultimately “*cannot profit*” (Jeremiah 7:8). Now they were comfortable in their sins and the delusion had got so powerful that they could even rationalize these sins as being overlooked, “*And come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations?*” (Jeremiah 7:10) Jeremiah warned them that they may fool themselves but they cannot fool God as “*behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD*” (Jeremiah 7:11).

(d) **VESTURE** (v17b) – Christ also points out another sad reality of these church members – they are “*naked.*” This nakedness He describes as a “*shame*” in v18. Yes, they may have been clothed in the most expensive designer attire that Laodicea has in its iconic stores, but they were spiritually naked. They had nothing of any value in God’s eyes. This sense of nakedness may indicate one of two things:

(i) Some members at Laodicea are unregenerate whose righteousness is as filthy rags and need to have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them by faith (2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 3:9). These people are like the Pharisees, who don’t feel their spiritual need for Christ’s

righteousness, “*..God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are..*” (Luke 18:11). They are also like the unregenerate religionists of Matthew 7 who boast in their outward works, yet have no saving relationship with Christ. They are spiritually dead, but are made lukewarm by the spiritual trappings of religion.

(ii) Some members are regenerated but backslidden. These persons were once hot in their heart but have cooled down by their apathy, complacency, and self-dependence, “*because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold*” (Matthew 24:12). Guzik says of such, “they have too much of the world to be happy in Jesus, but too much of Jesus to be happy in the world.” Believers are called to be continually clothed in the experiential righteousness of the fruit of the Spirit. This happens progressively in sanctification by acts of righteousness and being conformed to the image of Christ, “*But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof*” (Romans 13:14; cf. Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:12; Galatians 5:22-23).

CONCLUSION

The church at Laodicea thought they were a spiritual success. But the reality is very different. They are the opposite of the “*poor in spirit*” Jesus spoke of in Matthew 5:3. Before we judge them too quickly, we need to examine ourselves in the same light. What is our spiritual life like? Are we today, “*fervent in spirit?*” (Romans 12:11) Do our hearts burn today with the love of Christ as we study the Word of God? Do we still rejoice in the place of prayer? Are there lukewarm areas of our spiritual life? Do we think we have need of nothing?

Christ does not leave the members of the Laodicean church without a glimmer of hope. In all of His letters to the churches, the Master is faithful to point out the imperfections, but He is equally faithful and merciful to extend a window of grace. This prescription to the disease that was destroying this church from within, He lovingly details in v18-22.