

The Letters to the Seven Churches, Part VII- Nauseatingly Atrocious

Call to Worship: Isaiah 55:1-7

Hymn #488- *Lead on, O King Eternal*

1st Scripture: Luke 12:13-21

Hymn #494- *Jesus, Master, whose I am*

2nd Scripture: Revelation 3:14-22

Hymn #493- *Who is on the Lord's Side?*

Introduction:

One of the most tragic infections that can ever infiltrate the church is the infection of “spiritual blindness.” Even Christians can experience this frightening spiritual ailment for a time, if and when someone or something else begins to successfully challenge Christ’s authority in their lives. Especially in a country that is economically and materially prosperous, the danger of spiritual blindness is great. It is just so easy to gravitate in the direction of some form of idolatry, to remain there, to experience some level of hard heartedness, and to slowly, but progressively break fellowship with Christ. And what makes this matter worse, is that it can be done, while maintaining a “member in good standing” status in a local church. Spiritual blindness does indeed affect the way in which we live, but it begins in the heart. The heart departs, before the outward life follows.

In ministry, facing those who have backslidden in this kind of a way can be nauseating to say the least. I say this for at least two reasons that involve the way in which such people respond to rebuke and correction. First, there are those who “yes” you to death, but never change. You show them clearly from the Scriptures that they are moving off of the right path, and you graciously call them back to the right way in Christ, and they agree, but *they never take action* in the direction of change. And they get worse and worse and worse until they are long gone. And the whole way, you keep exhorting and rebuking, warning and cautioning, all to no *profitable* avail. They just “yes” you with their lips while rejecting you by their actions, the whole way down. And then secondly, there are those who simply refuse to acknowledge the danger they are in. They parrot all kinds of Scriptures about the grace of God, or they take all kinds of Scriptures out of context, in order to justify their present state, the whole time neglecting the clear and weighty teachings of Scripture (as a whole) which contradict their actions. And all

along, what they are really doing is shutting their eyes and ears because they are simply set on continuing down a path that appeals to their flesh, because their hearts (contrary to their lips) have already turned away from Christ, in order to lay hold of some idol. In such situations, while you certainly wish that they would move in the right direction, you would prefer that they at least outright acknowledge that what they are doing is wrong, rather than play games with God's Word and run to all manner of obvious false assurances. You would desire that they be "hot," but you would prefer that they be "cold," rather than deceptively "lukewarm." Their "lukewarmness" is, in fact, bitter and nauseating.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said in Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (riches/wealth)." We cannot have one foot in the world and one foot in the Kingdom of God. God wants the whole of our hearts or none of us. The church in Laodicea, the last of the seven addressed churches in the Book of Revelation, was a church that attempted to have the best of both worlds; they wanted the religious label; they wanted the Christian name and the benefits of the Christian faith, but they wanted the world at the same time. They thought they could serve two masters. They thought they could secure a love for Christ while maintaining a love for the world. And sadly, because this was the direction they had already gone, they were blind spiritually, not realizing that riches and material wealth were their real master, and Christ had been excommunicated from their midst because of it. You see, when you attempt to have both, Christ and the world, you wind up with the world alone, because Christ doesn't remain where He is not entirely received in the heart, as Lord and King.

I. An Historical Background of the city of Laodicea

In his excellent commentary on Revelation, titled, "Triumph of the Lamb," Dennis E. Johnson states,

"Laodicea was the most prominent of the three cities of the Lycus Valley, the other two being Colosse and Hierapolis. It was a major center of trade and transportation, located at a crossroads on the highway that reached from Mesopotamia across Asia Minor to the Aegean Sea. Significant features of the city were its robust economy, its medical college, and its water.

Although it sustained major damage from an earthquake in A.D. 60, Laodicea, unlike Philadelphia, declined disaster relief from the emperor. Instead, the Roman historian Tacitus records, ‘In the same year, Laodicea, one of the famous Asiatic cities, was laid in ruins by an earthquake, but recovered by its own resources, without assistance from ourselves’ (*Annals* 14.27.1). Laodicea was a prominent center of banking and commerce, and after the earthquake some of its wealthy citizens funded the construction or reconstruction of such public structures as a stadium, a gymnasium, heated and covered walkways and baths, and massive new city gates and towers. Laodicea was also known for textile production, especially black woolen products.”

“Among its cultural assets was a medical school founded by Zeuxis, a disciple of Herophilus of Chalcedon, ‘a leading dogmatic physician of the third century BC, who is known to have written on ophthalmology.’ Ancient sources mention a Phrygian powder that was used to make eye salve, and the medical school at Laodicea was probably involved in developing this and other pharmaceuticals. With its banks, its medical center, and its textile industry, Laodicea hardly seemed to be ‘poor and blind and naked’ (Rev. 3:17).”

Laodicea’s location in the Lycus River basin was strategic for trade and transportation but far from ideal from the standpoint of a city’s need for usable water. Hierapolis, on a plateau some six miles north, had hot springs known for their medicinal value. Colosse, ten miles to the east, received cool, pure drinking water from a nearby mountain stream. Laodicea had neither. The water of the Lycus River was and is ‘turbid with white mud’ and ‘nauseous and undrinkable.’ Remains of an aqueduct suggest that water may have been channeled from hot springs five miles south of the city. For a city so affluent in financial resources and self-sufficient in civic spirit, Laodicea ironically lacked a basic resource, water to drink.”

Regarding the water dilemma, Steve Greg, in his “Revelation: Four Views,” adds the following interesting comment, “The city’s water supply originated from hot springs six miles away at Denizli. In the process of travelling through the aqueduct to Laodicea, the water became tepid—neither hot nor cold.”

And so, clearly, from a worldly standpoint, the city of Laodicea was wealthy and prosperous. And no doubt, this had taken its toll on the compromising Laodicean church.

II. Christ's Self-Designation

“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...’ (vs. 14).

There are at least two parts to this self-designation:

1) Our Lord labels Himself as the “Amen, the Faithful and True Witness.”

In the opening of the Book of Revelation, in chapter 1:5, our Lord was referred to as “the faithful Witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.” And then again, in the opening of the letter written to the church in Philadelphia, in chapter 3:7, we have seen last time, how our Lord there referred to Himself as “He who is true.” And furthermore, we saw this carried over into Revelation 19:11, where our Lord, gloriously coming down from heaven to judge the world, sitting on a white horse, was called “Faithful and True.”

And so, when we consider this self-designation, given by our Lord, we are meant to understand that He is the source of all truth, toward whom, we must constantly fix our attention. We cannot trust the world around us. We cannot set our confidence upon what “seems to be” healthy and prosperous in accordance with our worldly surroundings (such as living in a country that is presently free, prosperous and at rest). We cannot set our confidence on what “seems to be” at the surface. We cannot even set our confidence on our own reasoning or understanding, because like the church at Laodicea, we can be quite deceived and think that all is well and that we have it all together, when in fact, we are truly blind, poor and naked from the standpoint of God. Looking to the “Amen” (the “Most Assured and True One”); looking to Christ and His Word, we gain access to the truth that lies underneath the surface level of deception that governs the world. What He says, must be. What He prophecies, must come to pass. Every promise of God is “Yes and Amen” in Christ! In essence, brethren, when our Lord refers to Himself as the “Amen” and the “Faithful and True Witness” here, He is saying that the only thing that is absolutely sure in this life, is whatever *He* states, in accordance with God’s plan of redemption, which finds its core in the death and resurrection of Christ. It is the call for us to continually lay hold of every piece of data surrounding our lives, and our decisions, and our actions, and to bring them up to the standard of God’s Word, so that we might gain a true and accurate assessment of where we presently stand in the sight of God. Our Lord wanted to convince His readers here,

who were arrogantly and blindly assuming that they were doing so well, that He Himself contained the truth of the matter, and they needed to wrest their conscience away from maintaining a confidence in their outward success so that they might carry it to the proper place of being governed by the Word and will of God as found in Jesus Christ. Should they do this, they would find that they are currently way off course, and in dire need of repentance and change. It is our Lord's way of saying, "All of the wisdom of God is contained in Me. Now listen up; hear Me!"

2) Our Lord refers to Himself as the "Beginning of the creation of God."

Now when we ponder this self-designation, we must be careful *not* to insert our own logical, year 2011, reasoning into the phrase. What is clearly *not* being stated here, is that our Lord Jesus Christ was created at some point before the world was, so that He is the first created thing. Not only would this contradict the Bible as a whole, which clearly proclaims that our Lord, with respect to His divine nature, is eternal, having no beginning, and being One Person of the glorious, eternal Trinity. But furthermore, we are given other Scriptural helps to help us unpack what this statement does indeed mean.

First, if we go back to Revelation 1:5, a text that we have just quoted, and a clear parallel text to this one, we begin to locate the meaning of this phrase. "And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth." We have already considered Jesus as the "Faithful Witness," but the rest of this statement in verse 5 is a direct parallel to our text in chapter 3:14. And so, when we consider our Lord as being the "beginning of the creation of God," we are meant to understand two things, the second of which hinges upon the first. First, this statement is *not* referencing Jesus as having been created at some point before the world was created, but rather it is referencing Jesus as the firstborn "from the dead," that is, the firstborn of the new creation of God, as the last Adam, who begins and has preeminence over the new race of people, namely, God's redeemed elect in Christ. It is a reference to the "resurrection of Christ!" Jesus is the beginning of the *new* creation in that sense. And as this "firstborn," He has the preeminence over all things, which leads to the second thing that we must understand about this statement, namely, that as the "firstborn from the dead"; as the "beginning of the creation of God," He is given the right of the firstborn, and in this case, that right entitles Him to sit on the highest throne, as ruler over all things. And this is why, verse 5 in

chapter one states, “the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.” By virtue of His resurrection from the dead, Jesus has *already* been exalted to the highest position of authority and power, and that is the point of our text here in chapter 3. And that is why the promise given to overcomers (in verse 21) involves being granted the glorious privilege of sitting with Christ *on His throne...etc.*

And so, brethren, when our Lord refers to Himself as the “Beginning of the Creation of God,” here in our main text, He is putting forth His own preeminence and authority, as a means of further motivating the spiritually blind and deceived church of Laodicea, to give Him their whole hearted attention, to take careful note of all that He is objectively saying (regardless of their subjective sense of things), and to respond accordingly.

III. Christ’s Words of Commendation

There are none!

IV. Christ’s Words of Rebuke

“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. 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...” (vs. 15-17)

Clearly, the material success and worldly prosperity of the city had infiltrated the life of this church, to the point that, unlike the church at Sardis even, Laodicea had not even a few faithful, who could be commended in this church! The whole church was grossly infected by a deceptive confidence in worldly riches, material gain and financial affluence. The textile market was booming. “Black wool” was the “in thing” and they owned the market on this valuable commodity. The banking industry was thriving, medicine and technology were advancing, and the Laodiceans were racking in the wealth. And as their material success advanced, their interest in spiritual growth, and their interest in seeing sinners converted and the Kingdom of God

advanced, grew lukewarm. They were far from “hot” and on fire for Christ, but they weren’t even “cold.” “Cold,” would have been more tolerable, because at least they would not be playing games with God. At least, they would not be arrogantly assuming that they were doing spiritually well, when they were spiritually bankrupt. Their confidence in themselves and in their religious standing was what made them “lukewarm” and most nauseating to Christ! They managed to maintain the trimmings of religion; they held onto all of the general traditions and the religious practices, but their hope and confidence; their very hearts were set upon worldly things. They took no interest in true doctrine and holiness (as the church of Ephesus had done) nor had they any desire or love for the lost (as Thyatira had). They had nothing; no sincere service unto Christ, no hunger for the glory of the Gospel, no heavenward focus...all of that was gone, and replaced by an all out love for the world. They were a lamp without oil or even flame, offering no light to the world.

The paradox here is quite obvious, isn’t it brethren? And this, once again points to the significance of recognizing Christ and His *objective truth* as the only means of truly discerning where we truly stand in the sight of God. Notice, from their own spiritually blind standpoint, they were “rich, have become wealthy and had need of nothing.” From an outward, pragmatic standpoint, everything seemed to be working out real well for them. But in truth, our Lord states that they were, “wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked.” The upcoming symbols of Revelation would paint quite a different picture than what their own sense of reality would have painted. And the symbols must be trusted, because they are the descriptive words of reality, given by the “Amen, the Faithful and True Witness.”

V. Christ’s Solution

“...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. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent. 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” (vs. 18-20).

You see, the Laodiceans had to begin by first subjecting themselves to the objective analysis of the “Amen, the Faithful and True Witness,” the Lord Jesus Christ. They had to recognize that though they were prosperous and successful from the standpoint of the world, in truth, they were naked and bankrupt. They had to embrace the true paradox of their circumstances. Though they had banks and great wealth, they were truly poor, and in desperate need of Christ’s sanctifying grace. They needed His gold, refined in the fire, so that they would be on the path of increasing holiness, which is indeed the true path of the rich. Though they had great success in the selling of precious fabrics, they were truly naked, and in desperate need of the white garments offered by Christ, so that their shame could be covered, and they would be pleasing in the sight of God and not men. And though they had advanced greatly in the medical field, believed to have even invented a valuable eye salve, they were truly blind, and in desperate need of spiritual sight, so they could walk, once again, in accordance with the will of God, as revealed in His Word. In their worldly richness, they needed to see, understand and acknowledge their spiritual poverty. And then they needed to do something about it. They needed to be zealous and repent. They needed to take action; to grab the bull by the horns and start moving in the direction of prospering the Kingdom of God, even to the expense of all that they had obtained in their worldly success.

They needed to “buy” these things from Christ. And brethren, when our Lord tells them to “buy” these things, we know that He is not putting forth a “works based” salvation. In accordance with Isaiah 55, we know that everything Christ offers is given freely by His grace. The point here is that, by acknowledging their own poverty and by turning to Christ *in* repentance and *for* grace, they would obtain all that they need, and begin to move, once again, on the right track to glory! Our Lord was here knocking, and if *anyone* would properly respond to His voice (*at the individual level*), He would come in and dine with him (He would restore their *presently broken* fellowship with Him).

In other words, brethren, our Lord is gracious and always willing to pardon, forgive and restore those who come to Him with a repentant heart, when they have found themselves drifting away *in any respect*. Notice, our Lord even tells this basically dead church, “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten” in verse 19. He rebukes and chastens His children because He loves them (See also Hebrews 12). He is thoroughly nauseated with the utter hypocrisy and lifelessness of

this church, but He still loves them. If He didn't, they would not have received this letter (or the Revelation as a whole for that matter) from Him. The warning is unto the intent of promoting change, so that the backslidden can be restored and remain in favor with God. And so, those who hear the rebuke of the Lord; those who "hear His voice" and listen and repent when necessary, ought to see themselves as objects of His grace and love. Isn't that an encouragement to us, brethren? Have any here, within the sound of my voice, drifted off course a bit? Perhaps, your devotional life is all but non-existent. You are hardly praying. Your church attendance may be wavering or maybe you are here, but not really here. The whole time, your thoughts are somewhere else. Maybe, you have fallen into some form of grievous sin, yet again, or maybe you have drifted back into the world? And, in any or all of these kinds of things, you are tempted to sink down into despair, ready to give up and walk away, because after all, there is no way that Christ can still love you. Be encouraged by this letter then! Those whom He loves, He chastens and rebukes. Go back to Christ; begin in prayer, and you will find Him, yet again, ready and willing to forgive and receive you. Look again at verse 20! That is a promise *for the believer*. If your fellowship with Christ has been broken by your sin, He is more than ready and willing to restore that fellowship, and eventually the joy that comes with it! But go...now! Don't put it off! Remember, right after He says, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten," He moves on to say, "Therefore be zealous and repent!" Now get back on track, and let nothing stop you! Break out of the poor habits; break out of the world's shell, and run hard after Christ! Start making changes...today!

VI. Christ's Warning

"So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth" (vs. 16).

For those who would continue to be presumptuous; for those who would continue to tempt Christ by remaining lukewarm, at some point you must realize that He will vomit you out. He will cast you out altogether, without the hope of return. He will give you completely over to your idol desires, and walk away, until He returns as your judge. We can be certain that those who are "vomited out," have not heard what the Spirit says to the churches, and therefore, prove

to be full blown hypocrites, who have never had a genuine faith from the outset. Those who remain unrepentant, will, in the end, reveal their true nature, and though they would wish to believe otherwise, they will hear the fearful words, “Depart from Me, I never knew you.”

VII. Christ’s Promise to those who Overcome

“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. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (vs. 21-22).

Those who overcome are not simply to be *subjects* in Christ’s Kingdom. That would be more than sufficient of a blessing, considering what we truly deserve. But those who overcome; those who deny themselves, and take up their crosses in this life and follow Christ, will ultimately reign with Him! And to eliminate any possibility of diminishing what Christ is saying here, He likens it to His own overcoming. After He bore His cross, and suffered the agony of His passion, He ascended to the right hand of the Father and sat down with Him on His throne. This is the pattern that pictures the victory given to all who overcome, even as Christ has. They will sit with Him on His throne!

Who will put off this life and all of its temporal trinkets for the sake of the Kingdom of God? Who will live for Christ here, so that he might reign with Christ in glory? The clock is ticking away, brethren. Invest in something far, far greater and eternal! Don’t get smothered and entangled in the affairs of “everyday life.” Don’t sacrifice what you could never lose in glory, to secure what you can never keep in this life!

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

AMEN!!!

Benediction: 2 Timothy 2:3-7