

## **Introduction**

To me, one of the most striking of Jesus' parables is that of the tax collector and the Pharisee. The Pharisee is the embodiment of what Jewish society saw as righteous and good and deserving of honor, the one most likely to be pleasing to God. The tax collector is the embodiment everything the Jews hated. They cheated their own people and hung out with the worst of the worst in society. In the parable the two went up into the temple to pray. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed like this: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." Meanwhile, the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" Jesus shocked everyone around him at the conclusion of the parable by declaring, "I tell you, this [tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts HIMSELF will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." A proud and self-sufficient attitude is not exclusive to Pharisees. It can also be present in Christians and in churches. Our text this morning reveals it was on hand in the church in the Asian city of Laodicea, and it made Jesus sick.

[Read Text and Pray]

The main point of Jesus's letter to the church in Laodicea is to expose a harmful and repugnant attitude which makes a church nauseatingly repulsive to him. Self-sufficiency is clearly one of the most repulsive postures a person or a church can have. Jesus makes it abundantly clear in his message to the church in the very well-to-do city of Laodicea. We can grasp Jesus's message to the church under three headings. Each one has to do with self-sufficiency. We will see the confrontation of self-sufficiency, the counsel for the self-sufficient, and then the confidence for the self-sufficient.

### **I. The Confrontation of the Self-Sufficient.**

#### **A. (The Characteristic of Self-Sufficiency)**

Jesus confronts this church for being lukewarm. He indicates that their lukewarm nature inclines him to spit them out of his mouth. Our imaginations could run wild as to what is indicated by being lukewarm, or we could, and we should, keep our focus on the context. And here, the context provides an explanation which spells out clearly what it is that makes this church so repulsive to Jesus. It is because they are self-sufficient. Verse 17 explains the lukewarmness about which Jesus speaks. "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." Here is the evidence of self-sufficiency. It is the spirit of "I have arrived."

At 2-and-a-half, my grandson is at the stage where he wants to do things himself. You are looking at him in a situation in which you know it requires more of him than he is able to handle. But he does not. And he does NOT want help. "No, Titus do it," he says. To even attempt to help him in those situations is a threat to his happiness. But then there are those times when after trying on his own without success, he suddenly cries, "Help!" But in Laodicea, there were no cries for help. There was no consciousness that the things I need the most are things I cannot supply for myself.

Jesus's impliates the church in Laodicea for their pride. They said, NOT "I have Christ and he is enough," but "**I** am rich. **I** have prospered. And **I** need NOTHING."

As with some of the other cities to which Jesus was sending these messages, the church in Laodicea took on themselves characteristics of the city in which they were located. Laodicea was by far the wealthiest of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation. In fact it was among the wealthiest of the cities in the ancient world, largely due to its commercial activity and a thriving banking industry. It was a city of the rich and wealthy, and they put their wealth on display in the beauty and facilities of their city. They had a stadium and a gymnasium and the finest of the fine. They outdid everyone else. And they did it all on their own. When an earthquake destroyed Laodicea in AD 60, the citizens refused help from the emperor, choosing rather to fund the rebuild themselves. And as it was with the city, so it seems to have become with the church. Now this was a church. People had come to faith in Christ, but an arrogance of accomplishment had settled upon them. They seemed to have fixed their gaze upon material wealth and prosperity. And their sense of sufficiency was based on their abundance and on their material prosperity. And there were consequences.

#### B. (The Consequences of Self-Sufficiency)

Jesus points the church in Laodicea to several consequences of its sense of self-sufficiency.

1. First, the church was deceived. Those who buy into the idea that they are rich and prosperous and have need of nothing are dead wrong. They are deceived. They believe a lie. They say one thing, but the truth is the opposite of what they believe. What does Jesus point out? The church says, "I am rich," but Jesus says, "No. You are deceived. You do not realize that in fact you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." You think because you are wealthy that everything is well with you. You refuse charity, but you are in such a pitiful situation that the only thing that can help you is charity. You think that because you live in the most affluent city in the region that you are well-to-do; you have what everyone should wish they had, but you are in fact pitiable. You think because you have money in the bank that you are rich, but in reality you are poor. Remember Jesus told the church in Smyrna that though they were impoverished, yet they were rich. So you see true wealth is not accounted for in terms of money.

The emphasis on wealth is understandable since Laodicea was such a financial capital. But the city was also known for an acclaimed school of medicine which produced a well-known eye medicine. In addition, there was its textile industry. Soft black wool unique to the area was woven into fine garments in Laodicea. Jesus's words declare, that the eye salve of Laodicea won't help their sight, and the black woolen garments woven in their fair city will not give them proper clothing. The people think they see but they are blind. They think they are well-clothed but they are naked. By their prosperity, they are deceived.

2. But not only are they deceived, their false belief puts them in direct contrast to Jesus. Notice how Jesus opened this message. As with his messages to the other churches, Jesus introduces himself in a way that connects with the message the church needs to hear. And to the church in Laodicea, Jesus refers to himself as the "Amen, the faithful and true witness, and the beginning of God's creation." As the Amen and the faithful and true witness, Jesus emphasizes the absolute dependability of what he says. He cannot and will not be mistaken. His witness is certain and trustworthy. He will not be deceived. He died for being an unflinching witness to the truth. And his witness concerning the church in Laodicea must be taken in with absolute conviction. While the church there is deceived about itself, Jesus sets the record straight and they imperil themselves if they do not listen to what he says.

Jesus also states that he is the beginning of God's creation—not the first thing God created but the source of God's creation. He points to the fact that all things were made through him and without

him was not anything made that was made. Everything in creation depends on Jesus for its existence. The implication is that if you are going to put your trust in something, if you are going to find your satisfaction in something, then it must be in the one who made all things rather than in the things that he made. One of the consequences of self-sufficiency is that it ends up resting in the material of creation rather than the source of the creation.

So the Laodicea church, by believing that their city and their circumstances testified that they needed nothing, set themselves in opposition to Jesus because it set them against Him who is truth and him who is creator.

3. Now in the third place the self-sufficiency of the Laodicean church made them nauseate Christ Jesus. When he says, "I will spit you out of my mouth," the idea is really more of vomiting or expelling with nauseating disgust. The city of Laodicea was located 6 miles south of Hierapolis. Hierapolis was known for its hot springs to which people went for relaxation and restoration. Colossae was about 10 miles east of Laodicea. And it was known for clear cold stream water which was refreshing to the thirsty. Meanwhile, the water at Laodicea was bad. It was carried there through aqueducts and arrived in a disgusting state both in taste and temperature. The Laodiceans would clearly grasp Jesus' reference to lukewarm and spewing out of his mouth because left untreated it is exactly what they wanted to do with their water. For all their wealth their water was repulsive. The cold water of Colossae was useful for refreshment. The hot water of Hierapolis was useful for its relaxation. But the water at Laodicea was nauseating. So is this church there because they are absorbed in material wealth and status; and they need nothing.

4. Finally, there is a practical ramification for this church. They have in effect shut Jesus on the outside. They have moved their wealth into the place of worship and fellowship and have shut Jesus out. This is what he insists as he describes himself as being at the door knocking. He is on the outside seeking to be let in. When you let stuff come between you and Jesus, it gets in the way big time! It disgusts Jesus and effectively thrusts him on the outside of fellowship with you. You close yourself off from him.

The church in Laodicea serves as an alarm bell to the fact that prosperity is a major test for Christians. We think of persecution and trials as testing, but prosperity is a no less a test. It is one thing to follow God through the desert on the way to the promised land. Think of all the failures of the Israelites along THAT way. But what happened once they came into the land of Canaan and found rest and prospered? In Jeremiah 2, the Lord declares that he brought the people into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when they came there, they defiled his land and made his heritage an abomination. When we wander through our own desert places, we tend to be more alert to our needs and more sensitive to our dependency. Just think how this may be evident in your travels. If you are like me and Melissa, we pray for safety as we are heading out on a major trip, but when I travel roads that are my more familiar daily path I tend not to pray as much.

Likewise, in times of material success and comfort, we tend to grow confident, taking that prosperity for granted. Our sense of desperate dependency subsides and we tend to overlook our vulnerability. Our fellowship with Christ diminishes as we in effect shut him out. Living in a kind of Laodicea like we do, we have to be constantly diligent to feel our need of Christ and keep our minds set on things above, to seek first the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness. We must recognize that material prosperity is not necessarily a blessing. Our blessing is not being rich in the stuff of the world but being rich in fellowship with him who made all the stuff.

If a church can tragically slip into this condition, it is the condition into which every human being is born. In the most basic sense—the spiritual one—every human being is wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Our sins are as scarlet. Our minds are corrupted. They set themselves on the things of the flesh. They are hostile to God, for they do not submit to God's law; indeed they cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But they believe otherwise. Folks everywhere think they are good persons. They would dare set themselves before the presence of God as though their garments are unspotted and their works unblemished. But of course they are mistaken. The world needs to hear the counsel of Jesus just as surely as this church needed it.

So, we turn now from the confrontation of the self-sufficient to . . .

## **II. The Counsel for the Self-Sufficient.**

A. Jesus offers counsel to the church. I counsel you. I advise you. It is really remarkable that he uses such language. He is the king of kings after all. But he is also the wonderful counselor. He is the Amen and the true and faithful witness. And we should listen to his counsel, just as we should listen carefully to all biblically faithful counsel. By nature we do not like to be told what to do. And ultimately we can offer counsel but we cannot coerce one another to follow Jesus. The proverbs urge us to listen to wise counsel. Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice." Proverbs 19:20 says, "Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom." Let us welcome the wise counsel of our brothers and sisters who walk in the Spirit. And let's especially listen to the counsel of Jesus here.

B. The counsel of Jesus is to make a wise purchase. Notice the word he uses. "Buy." The folks in Laodicea knew what it meant to buy. Here was one of the great commercial centers in the world. It was all about buying and selling. Buying is how you properly obtain goods. But notice that Jesus also tells the church where to go to make their purchase. BUY FROM ME. Get out of the market place in Laodicea to find what you really need. You will not find it there. You need to come away from the world to me, Jesus says. I am the only one who has what you need. You can only obtain real riches from me; you can only obtain proper covering for your sin (white garments) from me; you can only obtain the salve needed to give you proper sight from me. You might wonder whether this was a church full of lost people who need salvation or a bunch who had fallen who needed reviving. Probably some of both were in the church. But what they need, be it renewal or be it a first time experience, is a grasp of the essence of salvation. It is obtaining all you really need from Jesus. If you are a sinner who has never come to faith in Christ, you need him. If you are a follower of Jesus who has fallen into the love of the world, you need Jesus. You need a renewed focus on the fact that it is Jesus who gives true riches, sin-covering, and sight. Come to him. Come and buy.

So is salvation for sale? And is revival for sale? With what can a person buy these gifts? Oh they are costly, to be sure—more costly than you or I could ever afford! All the money in Laodicea could not buy the things people really need, the things that really make people rich! But the good news is that Jesus made the purchase. "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." And we buy from him by simply coming to him by faith. Isaiah 55:1 puts it this way. "Come everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk, without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food."

It is by faith that you come to Jesus. It is by removing your confidence from yourself and everything else. It is by finding him as the resource for all that you really need and more than that all that really makes you rich.

The counsel that Jesus is giving to the Laodicea church is to stop finding their worth in terms of material things. These things are the devil's illusion. It is not that having wealth is inherently sinful, but it is so easy for wealth to become our pursuit, our security, and the indicator of our prosperity. We Americans are rich. The poorest of us is rich on a number of material levels in comparison to the world. But true riches belong to some of the poorest people in the world. Earthly wealth is no indicator of spiritual prosperity. But it is hard in the midst of wealth to seek first the kingdom of God. It is hard not to find some measure of security in the wealth that you have. We must go back again and again and own what Jesus says here, in actuality apart from Christ we are wretched and pitiable and poor and blind and naked. Real riches are the hope of glory we have in Christ. Real clothing is the robe of Christ's righteousness. Real sight is the privilege to know and behold the glory of God. To take possession of these you must come to Christ. Believe in Him. Trust in Him. Honor him. Love him. And keep on doing so.

C. Now notice the love with which Jesus administers this counsel. So you have replaced Christ with the world. So you have become self-sufficient. You have not be living in dependence upon Christ. You have become detestable in his mouth, as detestable as was the water in Laodicea. DO not despair! Yes, notice this: Those whom I love I reprove and discipline.

The church in Laodicea appears to be the most repulsive of the seven. But Jesus still loves them. He is being frank and descriptive with them not because he is against them but because he is for them. He loves them. Proverbs 27:6 says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." Jesus is a friend that sticks closer than a brother and he is faithful when he wounds. He is loving when he wounds. It is not loving to let a brother or sister persist in rebellion. We cannot change them, but we do not help them by ignoring their sin. But I think the point Jesus wants to make is that the church should not become disillusioned and just give up or even fall into the pit of despair. His counsel is an opportunity to repent, to quit wallowing in shame, and get up in renewed determination and follow him in faith.

Are you wallowing in shame and defeat this morning? Are you out of fellowship with the Lord? Hear his call. Hear his reproof. But don't just lay there. Know that his reproof comes from love. SO get up and run to this one who is wooing you!!!

Finally, this morning, I want to point you to

### **III. The Confidence of the Self-Sufficient**

There are two matters of confidence here which Jesus sets before the self-sufficient church if they repent, IF THEY REPENT. If they remain self-sufficient there can be no such confidence. But if they repent, there is a present blessing and a future privilege which will be theirs.

A. First, there is a present blessing. It is the blessing of sweet fellowship with Christ Jesus. "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."

In that culture sharing a meal at a person's house was a welcome into fellowship, a celebration so to speak of friendship. It was an expression of personal affection and intimacy. If I had you over, I would be declaring love for you. And if you came, you would be indicating your warmth and love for

me. Jesus depicts himself outside the church knocking, showing he desired entrance. And if anyone in the church opens up to him he will share the affection and richness of fellowship with them. This is a present promise from Jesus. The voice is addressed to the church, but the reply comes one person at a time. Have you shut Jesus out of fellowship? Open the door and it will be renewed.

B. Second, there is a future confidence for those who repent. "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." Not only will we dine together in fellowship now, we will rule together in fellowship then. You see, the source from which creation comes is the one who rules creation. Jesus conquered by becoming part of the creation he brought into existence suffering its and his father's wrath and has taken his place at the right hand of God. Now those who repudiate the world and deny ourselves will take our place with him over all. And all the money in Laodicea could not begin to compare with the glory and riches of reigning in fellowship with Christ in this way.

### **Conclusion**

Brothers and sisters, do not love the world or the things in the world. Do not measure your importance or your success or your prosperity by what you have achieved in the this world or by the worldly resources you may have amassed. Do not kid yourself that the truest blessings are those which are material in nature. There are no greater riches than the riches of being loved by and granted fellowship with the One who rules the universe. We as a church must continually remember who and how we would be without him. We must not neglect to draw near to him who waits and who calls for that very thing that we may experience fellowship together with him.

### **Prayer**

### **Benediction**

"Jude Benediction"