

LAODICEA: THE CHURCH WITH A CLOSED DOOR
Rev 3:14-22 (24 March 2002)
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Well . . . I have my work cut out for me today. If this sermon leaves you feeling satisfied and secure, I have probably done a poor job. On the other hand, if this sermon makes you sick to your stomach, I have probably done a good job. After all, we are going to study the church about which Jesus Christ said, “You make Me want to puke.”

Laodicea, the lukewarm church and the last of the seven churches of Asia Minor addressed in the Book of Revelation. Some time between 261 B.C. and 253 B.C., Antiochus II (261-246 B.C.) fortified the earlier city of Diospolis as a Seleucid outpost, naming it after his wife or sister, Laodice (Λαοδίκη). The city was called “Laodicea on the Lycus” and “Laodicea of Asia” to distinguish it from at least four other cities of the same name founded by the Seleucids. (The Seleucids were a dynasty that ruled most of Asia Minor, Syria, Persia, and Bactria from 312 B.C. to 64 B.C.) Laodicea was strategically situated on a plateau in the fertile valley of the Lycus River at the intersection of three major trade routes. It was six miles south of Hierapolis, eleven miles west of Colossae, and a hundred miles east of Ephesus. In Roman times, Laodicea became the wealthiest city in the region of Phrygia.

The city of Laodicea was known throughout the Roman world for three things: its banks, its linen and wool industry, and its medical school and medicines. (1) *First, its banks.* When Cicero, the Roman statesman and philosopher, was travelling in the East in 51 B.C., it was in Laodicea that he cashed his letters of credit. Twice the city had suffered severely from the ravages of earthquakes. In A.D. 17, it had been devastated by the same earthquake that laid waste Sardis and Philadelphia. At the time, it received the same kindness and aid from Tiberius, the Roman Emperor, as these other cities had received. But in the earthquake of A.D. 60, when the city was all but completely destroyed, Laodicea was rebuilt without any financial aid from Rome. So arrogant was Laodicea about its wealth that it refused what we would call the “federal disaster relief funds.” Tacitus (c. A.D. 55-120), the Roman historian, wrote, “Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us.” Laodicea snubbed its nose at the offer of imperial aid, for this city was too rich to accept help from anyone.

(2) *Second, the linen and wool industry.* The fertile ground of the Lycus valley provided good grazing for sheep. By careful breeding a soft, glossy black wool had been produced that was much in demand and that brought fame to the region. Strabo (c. 63 B.C.–after A.D. 21), the ancient geography, wrote, “The country around Laodicea breeds excellent sheep, remarkable not only for the softness of their wool, in which they surpass the Milesian sheep, but for their dark or raven color. The Laodiceans derive a large part of their revenue from them.”

(3) *Third, the medical school and medicines.* Laodicea was widely known for its medical school, established in connection with the temple of Mēn Carou thirteen miles to the north and west. (Mēn was an ancient Carian, a god of healing who was later

identified with Asklepios.) Two of its most famous medicines were an ointment from spice nard for the ears, and an eye-salve made from “Phrygian powder” mixed with oil.

Money, clothing, and medicine—keep these three things in mind. As we will see, the prideful proclamation of the Laodicean church—“We are rich. We have prospered on our own. We need nothing” (v. 16)—and the penetrating perspective of Christ are shockingly different. According to Christ, the Laodicean church is “poor,” “naked,” and “blind” (vv. 17-18).

There was one major drawback to living in Laodicea: the city lacked an adequate and convenient source for water. Its location had been determined by the road system rather than by natural resources. And so, water had to be brought in from springs some six miles to the south (near Denizli) through a system of stone pipes approximately three feet in diameter. Such an aqueduct could easily be cut off, leaving the city helpless, especially in the dry season when the Lycus River could dry up. Furthermore, the water—although it was drinkable—was full of sediment. We will have more to say about the sickening, lukewarm water of Laodicea.

Now, let’s read the message of the risen and reigning Christ to the Christians in Laodicea as recorded by the Apostle John in Rev 3:14-22.

Rev 3:14⁴“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation:

¹⁵“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ²⁰Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (NRSV).

Jesus Christ identifies Himself as “the Amen”; that is to say, He is “the faithful and true witness” (cf. Isa 65:16). And He is the source of all God’s creation (cf. Col 1:15-18).

We come, now, to one of the best known—yet least understood—statements of Jesus Christ: “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit (spew) you out of My mouth” (vv. 15-16). The traditional interpretation of these words goes something like this. The adjectives “hot,” “cold,” and “lukewarm” refer to the spiritual zeal—or the lack of it—on the part of the Laodiceans. Jesus wants these Christians to be either “on fire” for Him (“hot”) or completely dead (“cold”), but not middle-of-the-road (“lukewarm”). In effect, Jesus says, “Be *for* Me or be *against* Me, but do not be *indifferent* to Me.” There are serious problems with this view, not the least of which is trying to understand how being cold is better than being lukewarm. Is opposing Christ

better than ignoring Christ? Is being spiritually dead better than being spiritually half-hearted? Is no commitment better than mediocre commitment? How can cold be better than lukewarm when *both* are totally unacceptable? Allow me to suggest a better interpretation.

The adjectives “hot,” “cold,” and “lukewarm” refer to the local situation in which the city of Laodicea found itself. At the city of Hierapolis, six miles away, there were hot springs that were prized for their medicinal properties. At the city of Colossae, eleven miles away, there was a supply of cold, pure water. But at Laodicea, the water was lukewarm and nauseating. Laodicea, in spite of all its prosperity, could provide neither the refreshment of cold water for the weary—as could its neighbor Colossae—nor the healing of hot water for the sick—as could its neighbor Hierapolis. Its lukewarm water was useless for either purpose, and was only fit to be “spit out of the mouth.” Cold water is useful and hot water is useful, but lukewarm water is useless. *The church in Laodicea was providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary, nor healing for the spiritually sick. It was totally ineffective, and so distasteful to Christ.* Had the church been either cold or hot—and Christ says, “I wish that you were either cold or hot”—had they been either, then Christ could have ministered through them to others. But since the church is only lukewarm, it is unfit for any ministry. *The point is the utter worthlessness of the Laodicean church.* To such a church Christ says, “You make Me want to puke.”

What is the problem? The problem is the Laodiceans are smug, satisfied, and self-sufficient . . . and unknown to them . . . sightless. They say, “We are rich. We have prospered on our own. We need nothing” (v. 17a). The “faithful and true witness,” Jesus Christ, says, “You are wretched, pathetic, poor, naked, and blind” (v. 17b). Having delivered the diagnosis, Christ then prescribes the remedy (and I am loosely paraphrasing v. 18): “You are so proud of your wealth—your banks and your money. You need to buy *My gold*—spiritual riches that have passed through the refiner’s fire and have been found to be trustworthy. You are so proud of your textile industry and you strut about in your black wool garments. You need to buy *My white robes* of purity and righteousness. You are so proud of your doctors and your medicines. I am the Great Physician and you need to buy *My eye-salve* so that you may see. Unless you allow Me to restore your sight so that you can see your sickness, there is no hope of healing.”

These are harsh words, and most American Christians do not want to hear from a God who will speak harshly to us. Yet, even when Christ rebukes lukewarm Christians, we must not miss the tone of His voice. His cries of reproof flow not from irrational anger, but from a broken heart: “I reprove and discipline those whom I love” (v. 19). Then He invites us over for dinner if we will but open the door for Him (v. 20).

The Laodiceans were a people who put their trust in material prosperity, in outward luxury, and in physical health. Hmm . . . that has a strangely modern sound to it. *Of the seven churches of Asia Minor, I fear that the temptations faced by the Laodicean Christians are the most like our own.*

As in Holman Hunt’s famous picture *The Light of the World*, Christ is outside the door and knocking. When Hunt drew this portrait of Christ knocking at the door of the human heart, he was right when he pictured that door with no handle on the outside, for the door of the human heart must always be opened from within.

“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (v. 22). Here for the seventh and last time we hear the exhortation to listen to what the Spirit is

saying to the churches. We are reminded that the messages to the seven churches of Asia Minor are at the same time a comprehensive message to the church universal throughout time. We—yes, you and I living in the twenty-first century—we must heed the warnings about the dangers of losing our first love (Ephesus), fear of suffering (Smyrna), doctrinal compromise (Pergamum), moral compromise (Thyatira), spiritual deadness (Sardis), failure to hold on (Philadelphia), and lukewarmness (Laodicea).

To the conquering Christians who overcome these dangers, Christ promises, “I will give a place with Me on My throne, just as I Myself conquered and sat down with My Father on His throne” (v. 21). All seating in Heaven is “reserved seating.” Do you have a reservation?

May God grant us eyes to see our need for Him, and ears to hear His invitation to us. “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

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