

To the Church in Laodicea

Revelation 3:14-22

Introduction

In the ancient world, few cities were as impressive as Laodicea. It was a place of wealth, influence, and self-made success. Known for its thriving textile industry, its production of luxurious black wool, and its advanced medical practices, Laodicea stood as a symbol of prosperity. When disaster struck with a devastating earthquake, the city famously refused outside help and rebuilt on its own. Independence was not just a necessity—it was a point of pride. By all outward measures, Laodicea lacked nothing.

Yet, there was a quiet irony rooted in the city’s life. Despite all its wealth and innovation, Laodicea had no reliable water source. Its survival depended on water piped in from neighboring cities—water that arrived neither refreshingly cold nor therapeutically hot, but lukewarm. Day after day, residents lived with this subtle yet constant reminder: it is possible to be strong in many ways and still lack what truly matters.

That tension isn’t limited to ancient cities. It’s a danger that affects every generation—and every church. It’s possible to have resources, reputation, and even religious activity, and still be missing something essential. It’s possible to feel secure while being spiritually vulnerable, to seem full while being empty, to assume all is well when something deeply wrong is present. And into that kind of situation, Jesus speaks—not to condemn from a distance, but to confront, to awaken, and ultimately to restore.

Apathy Sickens the Soul (vv. 14-16)

Jesus knows! To each of the seven churches, Jesus declares: *“I know your works.”* He knows their poverty, their tribulation, their faithfulness, and their failures—because He loves His bride, the church. And to the church in Laodicea, He says: **“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot”** (v. 15). This is not an opinion, not a hypothesis, and not slander. What Jesus knows, He sees—and what He sees is reality. How do we know? Because of who Jesus is. He is the **Amen**, the **faithful and true witness**, and the **beginning of God’s creation**.

Jesus is the **Amen**—the “Yes” to all of God’s promises. He does not merely affirm what is true; He is the fulfillment of it. As Paul writes, **“For all the promises of God find their Yes in him...”** (2 Cor. 1:20). As Sam Storms puts it, “Jesus doesn’t just say, ‘Amen’; he is ‘the Amen’... the validation of all that God has promised.”¹ He is the **faithful and true witness**. You

¹ Sam Storms, *To the One Who Conquers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway; 2008), 196.

can trust Him. What He says is not only honest—it is truth. He never misreads, never exaggerates, and never speaks in error. What He sees is reality (Rev. 1:5). And in contrast to the Laodicean church—who prove to be unreliable, unfaithful, and ineffective—Jesus remains utterly dependable, completely faithful, and the true witness. His words are not unkind, but lovingly and truthfully direct. Because He is faithful and true, He neither misspeaks nor misleads—He tells the truth that must be heard.

Finally, Jesus is the **beginning of God’s creation**—not that He has an origin, but that He is the source of all creation and the beginning of the new. **“All things were made through him...”** (John 1:3), and through Him God is making all things new: **“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation...”** (2 Cor. 5:17); **“Behold, I am making all things new”** (Rev. 21:5). And it is this Jesus—the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation—who now says: **“I know your works...”** What works? Jesus answers: **“you are neither cold nor hot... you are lukewarm”** (v. 15).

Laodicea was heavily dependent on external water supplies. On one side of the city was Colossae, known for its cool, refreshing drinking water. On the other side was Hierapolis, known for its hot springs, believed to bring healing through their minerals. Colossae’s water refreshed; Hierapolis’ water healed. By contrast, water was brought into Laodicea—likely from nearby thermal sources—and by the time it arrived, it was no longer hot and not truly cold, but lukewarm, mineral-laden, and often unpleasant to drink. It lacked the refreshing quality of cold water and the therapeutic value of hot water—it was useful for neither. And this is the word Jesus uses to describe His church. In fact, He goes even further: **“So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth”** (v. 16). The Greek word for “spit” literally means “vomit.” Listen to the way the BSB translates this verse: **“So because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to vomit you out of My mouth!”**

Many have interpreted Jesus’ desire for the Laodicean church to be either cold or hot—cold meaning spiritually dead and hot meaning spiritually alive—as a sign of His anger over their indifference. However, a better understanding considers the local context of Laodicea. Jesus is calling this church to be like the cold water that refreshes or the hot water that heals, instead of being ineffective by offering neither. The church had lost sight of her purpose in the city, and as a result, her actions were revolting to her Groom—she had become so spiritually ill that she was practically useless. They offered neither healing to those who were spiritually sick nor refreshment to those who were spiritually thirsty. They were missionally useless. With that in mind, let’s examine what Jesus says to this church.

Self-Sufficiency Bankrupts Life (vv. 17-18)

This sickness born from their apathy was symptomatic of a deeper problem: self-sufficiency. Those within the church in Laodicea had come to believe they were doing just fine on their own. It is true that missional apathy leads to spiritual blindness, but it is also true that the more self-

sufficient we believe we are, the less effective we become. The more we depend on ourselves, the less we depend on Christ—and the less we depend on Christ, the more spiritually lifeless we become. Jesus said of the Christian,

I am the true vine, and My Father is the keeper of the vineyard. He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, and every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes to make it even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. Just as no branch can bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. (John 15:1-4; BSB)

Life and fruit-bearing come only as we remain connected to the true vine, who is Jesus. The life-giving sap of the vine is not something we can produce on our own—we need the vine. The lie of self-sufficiency is that we can bear fruit apart from Him. But the reality is this: the less we depend on the vine, the more lifeless we become. This is exactly what happened to the church in Laodicea.

The true testimony of Jesus concerning His church in Laodicea was something their apathy and self-sufficiency had blinded them from seeing. Here is what Jesus said: **“For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,’ not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked”** (v. 17). In other words, they had taken their eyes off the all-sufficient Christ and, in doing so, developed a deeply distorted view of themselves. In claiming to be “rich,” they could not see their need; in saying they had “prospered,” they could not see their sin; and in believing they needed nothing, they revealed the depth of their pride. This is what made their condition so repulsive—it made Jesus want to vomit.

Now consider their claims in light of the first three beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted... Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”** Those who find life in Jesus, begin by recognizing their spiritual poverty, yet the church in Laodicea claimed to be rich. Those who belong to Christ mourn over their sin, yet the Laodiceans believed themselves to be prospering. Those who walk with Jesus lay aside their pride and depend on Him, yet this church believed they needed nothing.

Because they had taken their eyes off Jesus, they had become something very different from what they believed themselves to be. They thought they were self-sufficient. The irony is striking: while they believed they had prospered in three ways, Jesus reveals six realities that define their true condition.

1. **They were ignorant:** They did not realize how far they had fallen.
2. **They were wretched:** They were spiritually dried up and miserable.
3. **They were pitiable:** Their condition was shameful—their witness empty and ineffective.
4. **They were poor:** Though materially prosperous, their compromises left them with nothing of eternal value—nothing to show for what Christ purchased on their behalf.

5. **They were blind:** Though their city was famous for its eye salve, the church could not see, because it had taken its eyes off Jesus.
6. **They were naked:** Though clothed in the city's finest garments, before Christ they stood exposed and ashamed.

It is striking that Jesus lists six deficiencies. In Scripture, seven often symbolizes completeness, while six falls short of that fullness. Whether intentional or not, the message is clear: this church was deeply incomplete. They believed they had everything—but in reality, they were lacking in every way. They thought they were thriving, but in truth, they were spiritually bankrupt, having believed the lie that they could live the Christian life apart from absolute dependence on Jesus.

So what solution does Jesus offer? His answer is both confronting and gracious: **“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.”** In other words, come to Him. What they thought they possessed, they lacked—and what they truly needed, only Jesus could give. Their wealth could not make them rich, their garments could not cover their shame, and their medicine could not cure their blindness. Jesus is calling this church, and He is calling us back to the good news of Isaiah 55:1-3.

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. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

Jesus said the same thing condensed into one sentence: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”** (Matt. 5:6).

Here is the hope: Jesus does not expose our spiritual condition to humiliate us, but to bring us back and restore us. The same voice that confronts with a sharp rebuke is the voice that gently invites us to return. He does not abandon His church—He extends a gracious call to come back to Him.

Abiding in Jesus Satisfies the Heart (vv. 19-22)

For me, these verses are among the most beautiful and comforting in all of Scripture when it comes to Jesus' persistent love for His church. The words, **“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline...”** (Rev. 3:19), remind us that as long as we are alive and attentive, there is still time—Christ's rebuke is not rejection, but His redeeming love. This is why our Lord adds: **“so be zealous and repent.”**

This truth is echoed in Proverbs 3:11–12: **“My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights,”** and again in 1 Corinthians 11:32: **“But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.”** Taken together, these passages reveal that the Lord’s discipline is not meant to destroy but to restore. It is the gracious work of a loving Father who refuses to let His people drift toward condemnation.

But what I find so fascinating about this letter is what Jesus says next: **“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”** (vv. 20–21). Even after His strong and just rebuke, Jesus does not stand at a distance waiting for us to come to Him—He comes to us.

This verse has been used in countless evangelistic appeals, but here Jesus is not speaking to unbelievers—He is speaking to His church. His knocking is a call to repent, a call to renewed fellowship, a call to abide in Him.

There’s an interesting parallel to this verse in Song of Solomon 5. The beloved comes, he knocks—but she delays. And by the time she rises to open the door, he is gone. All that remains is the fragrance of myrrh on the handle—a reminder that he had been there.

I sleep, but my heart is awake. A sound! My beloved is knocking: “Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night.” I have taken off my robe— must I put it back on? I have washed my feet— must I soil them again? My beloved put his hand to the latch; my heart pounded for him. I rose up to open for my beloved. My hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh on the handles of the bolt. I opened for my beloved, but he had turned and gone. My heart sank at his departure. I sought him, but did not find him. I called, but he did not answer. (Song 5:2-6)

Now, I don’t know how healthy your relationship with Jesus is. I don’t know if it resembles some of the marriages in this congregation—where there is barely a pulse of love or romance. But I do believe that over the past six weeks, you have felt the Spirit’s prodding concerning some of the “leaven” He is calling you to remove.

Maybe you have abandoned the love you had at first, like the church in Ephesus. Or perhaps you have embraced teaching that has actually harmed your relationship with Jesus—because what you believe to be true is not, like the church in Pergamum. Maybe there’s a Jezebel in your life you’ve been listening to—or even obeying—like the church in Thyatira. Or perhaps you are Jezebel... and have refused to repent, placing yourself in danger. Or maybe you’ve become so lethargic in your walk with Jesus that you appear more dead than alive, like the church in Sardis. Or maybe you’re in a good place. Maybe you love Jesus deeply and sincerely. But maybe you are weary of suffering and need encouragement, like the church in Smyrna. Maybe you have kept

Jesus' word and not denied His name—but you're anxious about what lies ahead, like the church in Philadelphia.

Or maybe... you are neither cold nor hot.

Maybe you have become:

1. Ignorant—drifting further than you realize.
2. Wretched—spiritually dry and miserable.
3. Pitiable—your witness empty and ineffective.
4. Poor—having nothing to show for what Christ purchased on your behalf.
5. Blind—because you have taken your eyes off Jesus.
6. Naked—standing before Him exposed and ashamed.

But I have good news for you, Christian: Jesus is not done with you. He is not distant from you. He is not waiting for you to clean yourself up. He is standing at the door—and He is knocking.

Listen again to what He says: “**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.**” Do not make the same mistake the bride made in Song of Solomon 5—do not linger. Go to Him. Jesus wants be in fellowship with you; He wants to tabernacle with you.

Listen to the Holy Spirit: the door may still be closed—but He is still there. And that means... there is still time. Do not delay. Repent.