

Revelation A Wednesday Night Bible Study

Lesson #11
Revelation 3:14-22
9/20/2006

Christ's Letter to the Church at Laodicea

INTRODUCTION

This letter represents church history from about 1900 AD to the end of the age, including, of course, the time in which we live.

The city of Laodicea was located in a beautiful valley, subject to earthquakes which eventually destroyed it, about 40 miles east of Ephesus, about 10 miles west of Colossae and 6 miles south of Hierapolis.

It was founded by the Selucid king, Antiochus the Great, who populated it by importing about 2,000 Jewish families from Babylon. He named the city after his wife Laodice whom he later divorced before she poisoned him. There is no indication that Paul ever visited the city, but it is thought that Epaphras might have founded the church there (Colossians 1:7; 4:12-13).

In His letter to the church our Lord referred to several characteristics of the city and church and used several pointed analogies regarding these characteristics to emphasize His statements.

First, **“Laodicea,”** the name of the city has meaning that is noteworthy. The name is composed of two Greek words, *laos* (2992), meaning **“people or nation,”** and *dicea* or *dikaios* (1342), meaning **“right, just, or pertaining to what is right.”** When applied to God it refers to His justness or righteousness and has a similar meaning when properly used to describe His followers. However, in certain uses it can refer to a person who establishes his own rules for life, i.e., rejects God's standards, sets up his own and **“focuses on himself and his rights and what he thinks is right.”** This is clearly the meaning Jesus expressed when He said that He **“didn't come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance”** (Matthew 9:13) and when He said **“... some trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others”** (Luke 19:9). Jesus used the word **“Laodicea,”** here with its combination of the two words explained above, in a dramatic play on words and word meanings. It emphasizes that this present age of the church is an age when the focus is upon what the people want, what pleases the people, their rights, etc., rather than focusing on God, His attributes, what He wants from us, what pleases Him, and the application of His absolutes to our lives. This is clearly seen when we recognize the existential fluidity of today's pagan culture and how many modern churches have turned their attention from God's Word, from pleasing Him and conforming to His standards to doing what they want to do and what pleases them. In other words, what we see today is that people focus upon themselves instead of focusing on God.

Second, since **Laodicea** was located on a major trade route it became a very wealthy city because of two commercial products. **First,** the Laodiceans bred a special sheep that produced fine, soft, glossy black wool that was widely sought and admired for the making of fine clothing. **Second,** the Laodiceans had a medical school, founded by Herophilos which produced an eye salve made from ground-up minerals and oil mixed together which was in great demand as a popular treatment for eye diseases. The marketing of these two products, the fine wool for expensive clothing and the eye-salve, resulted in tremendous wealth for the Laodiceans.

Third, there was the useless and repugnant lukewarm water of Laodicea. Ten miles to the east was Colossae which had springs that produced cold, refreshing water. By the time that water dropped 300 feet to the level of Laodicea and flowed the ten miles between the cities, it was no longer refreshingly cold, but lukewarm. Also, 6 miles to the north was Hierapolis with its healing springs of hot, boiling water, but, again, by the time that water flowed into Laodicea it had picked up minerals from the calcium deposits which left it with an encrustation, was tepid, only lukewarm and worthless and only good for inducing vomiting.

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Thus, in His letter to the Laodiceans, Jesus used well-known characteristics of the city and church with which to frame His harsh and pointed statements of truth.

Revelation 3:14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;

Revelation 3:15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.

Revelation 3:16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

Revelation 3:17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked:

Revelation 3:18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.

Revelation 3:19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.

Revelation 3:20 Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

Revelation 3:21 To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

Revelation 3:22 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

CHRIST'S SALUTATION

As He addressed *“the angel,”* the pastor of the church, Jesus described Himself as **“... the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God”** emphasizing His attributes that applied to the church.

First, Jesus pointed out that He is the **“Amen.”** **“Amen”** is from a Hebrew word that means **“certainty or truth.”** It is often translated **“so let it be”** or **“truly.”** Isaiah spoke of God as **“the God of truth or Amen”** (Isa. 65:16), or **“the One Who will keep and bring His covenant promises to pass.”** This title was used of Christ and He often used it to emphasize His truthfulness as in John 1:51. Therefore, He uses this title here to stress that what He says about this church is absolutely trustworthy and reliable.

Second, He is **“the faithful and true witness”** and what He said to this church about their spiritual condition was not diluted, distorted or double-tongued. His diagnosis was correct.

Third, Jesus emphasized His work as Creator: **“the beginning of the creation of God.”** Apparently the secularistic philosophies referred to in Colossians 2:8 had also infected the church at Laodicea. All false philosophies are based upon evolutionism, the denial of Christ as Creator and as being transcendent and above His creation. Such philosophies also reject the sense of accountability to Christ since He is not considered to be the Owner and Judge of all things. The reference was appropriate and, since He was about to judge the church at Laodicea, He emphasize His place as both Creator and Judge.

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Lesson #11
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CHRIST'S CONDEMNATION

Jesus had no words of commendation for the church at Laodicea, only stinging and sarcastic words of condemnation. **"I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot."**

With the exception of the church at Sardis, the Lord had found some **"works"** in all of the other churches which He could commend, but not in this church. None of **"the works"** mentioned here were good. They were not worthy of commendation. They were only evil works. **"Works"** are the result of what one is, they are the outward expressions of an inner nature and indicate that the church at **Laodicea** was corrupt.

"Cold works" would have indicated a denial of the basic doctrines of the faith and an active hostility towards Christ. **"Hot works"** would have indicated a fervent passion and loyalty to the Word of God and to the Lordship of Christ. Such **"hot works"** would have reflected a devotion to the holiness of God, a reverent and humble spirit in His presence and a focus on pleasing Him, both in worship and in life. **"Hot works"** would be an outward expression of a church that refused to compromise with the pagan culture around it.

Jesus said that the church was **"...neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot."** They were between hot and cold. Some have called them a neutral church. They did not want to be known as a church that was openly identified with a holy God, with His holy Word, with His doctrines or with His nature. Neither did they want to be called a liberal church openly denying the faith and the doctrines of God's Word. Some have called them a professing without possessing church. They professed to belong to Christ, but they were not possessed by Christ nor did they possess Christ. They bore the name of Christ, but they expressed and adhered to the nature of the world around them and desired to be liked by the world. They adapted themselves to the pagan culture so that they could become comfortable places to which pagans could come without being confronted by the truths of God.

Such church are repugnant to Christ and defame His name before the world. While they accrue power, position, praise, acceptance and wealth in the world, they are rejected by Christ. They are not His, no matter how many "converts" they proclaim to make. In the matter of converts, one has to ask, **"to what are such people being converted to?"** Christ says they are not being converted to Him. He will **"spew them out of His mouth."** Paul wrote to his young disciple, Timothy, and said of such churches, that they **"have the form of godliness, but deny the power thereof: from such turn away"** (2 Timothy 3:5). Such churches are not "backslidden" churches which once served the Lord, but never were His. They may claim to worship Christ, but, in reality, are churches of Satan. Christ said that He has no tolerance for them.

Then, in verse 17, Christ described their condition: **"Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."** They had compromised with the pagan culture so much that they evaluated themselves by pagan standards. By such standards they were successful, attractive, and powerful. Their standard of evaluation betrayed them and indicated that they really belonged to the world and to Satan. Christ told them that by His standard their real condition was the exact opposite of what they thought them-

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Lesson #11
Revelation 3:14-22
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selves to be. Their values and standards were set by themselves (refer back to the meaning of the word **“Laodicea”**) according to what they thought was right instead of according to God's standards of righteousness. Since they measured themselves by their own subjective standards, they thought they were successful. God's Word tells us that such thinking is not wise, but foolish: **“...they measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise”** (2 Corinthians 10:12).

In view of the harsh judgment that Christ pronounced upon such a church one is prompted to ask some serious questions: “Why would anyone engage in such self-deceit? Why would anyone think that there is anything at all to be gained by trying to deceive the Lord, knowing that it impossible to do so? Why would anyone even want to pretend to be a follower of Christ when He still loves the world?”

On the cathedral in Lubeck, Germany is an inscription that is still true:

Ye call Me Master and obey Me not.
Ye call Me Light and see Me not.
Ye call Me Way and walk Me not.
Ye call Me Life and choose Me not.
Ye call Me Wise and follow Me not.
Ye call Me Fair and love Me not.
Ye call Me Rich and ask Me not.
Ye call Me Eternal and seek Me not.
Ye call Me Noble and serve Me not.
Ye call Me Gracious and trust Me not.
Ye call Me Might and honor Me not.
Ye call Me Just and fear Me not.
If I condemn you, blame Me not.

CHRIST'S COUNSEL

“I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.”

Once again, playing upon the meaning of the words used by the people in the church to describe themselves, Christ set forth a stark contrast. Jesus told them what they really needed to correct their self deceit. They had grown wealthy in the ways of the world, but they were spiritually bankrupt and needed to turn to Him for spiritual riches. They had produced the wool that was admired around the world to make costly clothing. But were spiritually naked, clothed only with the useless sham of self-righteousness and they needed to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ because they were naked before God no matter how good they looked to the world.

The sham of everything about them can be best understood in relation to what our Lord described in the last portion of His statement about the eye-salve. Dr. J. Vernon McGee says that modern chemists have recreated the eye-salve that they produced and sold around the world and that it does absolutely nothing to aid the eyes. It was all an empty sham, a claim for healing with no merit, no benefits. Such characterized the church at Laodicea — an empty sham, pretending to be something they were not!

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CHRIST'S CALL TO THE CHURCH

First, Jesus told them that **“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent.”**

The word for **“rebuke”** is **elegcho** (1651) elsewhere translated **“convict”** or **“reprove”** as in John 16:8. The word for **“chasten”** **paideuo** (3811) means **“to instruct, to educate, to discipline.”**

Christ told them that because He loved them He would prove them to be wrong, damned in their sin and instruct them and educate them in what they needed to do.

What was it they needed to do? The same thing that every sinner must do to deal with his sin problem — **“repent.”** **“Repentance”** is the doorway through which every sinner must go in order to be made acceptable by the Lord for coming into His presence. And, Christ said, they were to be zealous in their repentance, not halfhearted or resistant to His convicting work. The zealousness of which Christ spoke stood in stark contrast with their lukewarmness. He was tired of their halfheartedness. This has not changed. Even as Christ wanted, and demanded, their all or nothing, He does the same today. Lots of people make professions of faith. Whether or not the profession is accompanied by the possession is known by whether or not the one professing perseveres and continues. Of course, Christ knows immediately, instantly, whether what comes out of a person's mouth agrees with what is in his heart, but it is only known outwardly over time. One who not only professes but also possesses will be an **“overcomer”** and Christ said **“to him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne....”**

Christ said, **“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”** If a sinner's heart is to be opened to Christ, the sinner must open it himself. Christ will never force His way into a man's heart because that sinner must invite Him in. He invites Christ to come in when he repents and trusts Christ and turns his life over to Him. Christ will enter any man's heart if that man will only invite him in and He knocks on the door of every man's heart waiting to be allowed in, but He waits for the door to be opened from the inside, always!

Christ said that **“He also overcame and am set down with my Father in His throne”** and you can be sure that those who join Him will truly be His. No pretenders will be allowed and He knows who they are.

Hear what He has to say. Hear with a commitment to obedience.