

**The Church at Laodicea, a Lukewarm Church—
Rekindling your Zeal for Christ
(Revelation 3:14-22)**

The seventh church Jesus addressed in the book of Revelation called the city of Laodicea its home. This church had a rich heritage but had lost its zeal. Jesus described it as “lukewarm” in its commitment to Him. Like the church at Laodicea, we need to rekindle our lost zeal for Jesus Christ. The church at Laodicea forever stands as a reminder to Christians to be fervent in their faith.

**The Lord Jesus Christ challenges the church’s spiritual
indifference by warning it about its repulsive condition (3:14-16).**

After describing His divine authority Jesus moved directly to challenging the church at Laodicea for its spiritual indifference and complacency. Like the church at Sardis, the church at Laodicea received no word of commendation from the Lord. The sin in this church far overshadowed any noteworthy achievements for the cause of Christ.

Jesus addressed the ancient church at Laodicea, a lukewarm church (3:14a).

The name Laodicea comes from two root words meaning “people judgment.” In this message Jesus Christ pronounced warnings of judgment on His people for their spiritual indifference. Laodicea was strategically located in Asia Minor where two river valleys joined—the Lycus River and the Maeander River. Sister cities in the Lycus River valley included Colosse and Hierapolis. Paul wrote a New Testament letter to the church at Colosse in which he referred to believers living in Hierapolis and Laodicea (Colossians 2:1; 4:13, 15, 16). Due to its location along these river valleys, Laodicea influenced the trade routes between eastern cities and Ephesus. Unfortunately, Laodicea had no adequate supply of drinking water of its own and had to transport water via aqueduct from the direction of Hierapolis six mile away. Hierapolis was noted for its hot springs, but the water would have become tepid by the time it reached Laodicea.

Economically, the city of Laodicea was noted for its self-sufficiency. Because of its location as a commercial crossroad Laodicea became a wealthy city with a strong banking industry. When an earthquake destroyed much of the city early in the first century, Laodicea actually refused the financial assistance of the Roman Empire and used its own financial resources to rebuild the city. Laodicea also developed a trade in high quality black wool from a strain of sheep bred in the region. Another source of Laodicea’s wealth was its production of medical products, especially an eye salve made from local minerals. This eye salve was connected with a school of medicine in Laodicea. Because medicinal products were a part of the economic base at Laodicea, the city had a temple to the god of healing, Asclepius, but even pagan religious fervor seemed lacking in this self-sufficient city. Laodicea was a prosperous city but spiritually indifferent.

Christianity made its way to the Lycus River valley and Laodicea in the second half of the first century A.D., most likely as an outgrowth of Paul’s evangelistic efforts. Epaphras, a coworker of Paul from Colosse, may have been influential in establishing the churches in that region (Colossians 1:7; 4:12). Although there is no record of Paul having visited Laodicea,

he certainly knew the people of that church. Some scholars believe that the letter to the Laodiceans that Paul mentions in Colossians 4:15-16 may have been a copy of the book of Ephesians.

Jesus described Himself as the authoritative witness and the architect of creation (3:14b).

Jesus Christ identified Himself in three ways in this letter to the Laodiceans. First, He called Himself the “Amen.” This term means acknowledgement and certainty of that which is true. Jesus Christ is the truth, trustworthy in all He says. The Laodicean Christians needed to return to their devotion to the truth in Jesus Christ. Second, Jesus said that He is the faithful and true witness. His testimony concerning Himself and concerning God is reliable and worthy of zealous commitment. Third, Jesus is the ruler of all creation. Literally, He said that He is “the first of God’s creation.” The term “first” doesn’t mean that Jesus is a created being but that He is preeminent above creation, the architect of creation. The church at nearby Colosse faced false teaching in regard to the person of Christ a generation earlier and Paul used similar language to emphasize Christ’s preeminence as the divine Son of God (Colossians 1:15-17). Possibly the church at Laodicea had likewise lost its appreciation for the headship of Christ over creation and over the church.

Christians too easily lose their zeal for Christ, falling into spiritual indifference (3:15).

Few things are more deadly to the Christian walk than spiritual indifference. The church at Laodicea had lost its zeal for Jesus Christ. It was, by Christ’s evaluation, a “lukewarm” body of believers. Having examined this church’s works, Jesus said that these people were neither cold nor hot. Christ uses these terms to describe various degrees of spiritual fervor. A “cold” condition refers to obvious disregard for the things of Christ (compare the related term in Matthew 24:12). A spiritually “hot” individual is characterized by zeal for Christ (compare Acts 18:25 and Romans 12:11). But to be “lukewarm” is deceptively hypocritical. Do these terms contrast unbelievers and believers, or do all three terms apply to Christians with various levels of spiritual enthusiasm? While it’s possible that the “cold” person is an unbeliever, the fact that Jesus is addressing the church makes it likely that all three categories apply to Christians. Those who are cold have lost their spiritual fervor. Those who are hot are active and alive. However, those who claim to be hot for the Lord but have little heart for Christ’s church, His people, or His work dampen the zeal of other believers and reinforce the negative attitudes of unbelievers regarding the person of Jesus Christ. Those who are spiritually cold can be won back to a zealous regard for Christ—their position is obvious. But those who are lukewarm are, as it were, inoculated toward spiritual things. They have a dose of Christianity but find it difficult to become seriously infected with spiritual things! For this reason Jesus said that He preferred cold or hot over lukewarm faith.

Spiritual indifference within the church is repulsive to Christ (3:16).

To such lukewarm Christians Christ gives the warning that judgment is coming. They were neither hot nor cold. Therefore He would “violently vomit” them out of His mouth! Lukewarm Christians nauseate the Lord. Jesus wants His followers to be zealous, not listless. He demands devotion instead of indifference.

The Lord Jesus Christ challenges the church's spiritual complacency by inviting it to secure true spiritual wealth and health from Him (3:17-18).

Jesus had another charge to lay against the church at Laodicea. Not only was it spiritually indifferent (lukewarm), it was also spiritually complacent. These Christians were self-satisfied in their wealth and in their perceived self-sufficiency. The church had embraced these very attitudes that permeated the rest of this pagan city.

Christians too easily mistake their self-sufficiency for spiritual prosperity when in fact they are spiritually destitute (3:17).

The church at Laodicea had become complacent in regard to its faith. These believers had deceived themselves into thinking that they were satisfied in their spiritual lives. Apparently their economic wealth made them mistakenly think that they were experiencing God's blessing. They claimed that they needed nothing. But in reality these lukewarm Christians were spiritually destitute. They were "wretched," a term Paul uses to describe a defeated Christian (Romans 7:24). They were "pitiful," a characteristic of those who have unfounded hope (compare 1 Corinthians 15:19). The Laodicean Christians were also spiritually "poor, blind, and naked"—beggars who couldn't see the spiritual reality in which they lived and whose lives were shameful rather than honorable. Such is the condition of all who place their confidence in earthly riches.

Jesus alone offers the remedy for spiritual complacency through His gifts of true enrichment, righteousness, and enlightenment (3:18).

Jesus invites His people to exchange worldly wealth for true riches. Although the Christians in Laodicea thought they were wealthy, their wealth was merely worldly wealth. Christ "counseled" them—note this gentle nudge in place of what could have been an authoritative command—to buy from Him spiritual "gold" purified with fire in order to become truly rich. Jesus asked the Laodiceans to secure that which cannot be purchased with money (compare Isaiah 55:1). He wanted them to be enriched with true spiritual wealth, the blessings of God that are available through full dedication to Christ (1 Peter 1:7). Christ also offered them white clothes (in contrast to the black wool produced by that region) to cover their shame and spiritual nakedness. White clothes refer to righteousness, in this case a righteous way of life that would reflect the righteousness that they'd received through faith in Christ. Christ also encouraged the Laodician Christians to apply spiritual salve to help them see life from a spiritual perspective, to experience true enlightenment. These Christians needed to exchange their material self-sufficiency for sufficiency in Jesus Christ alone.

The Lord Jesus Christ reassures the church of His love and His desire for intimate spiritual fellowship (3:19-20).

In spite of the fact that Jesus had no words of commendation for the church at Laodicea, He did express His love for these Christians, a love that longs for renewed fellowship.

Jesus disciplines those He loves in order to restore their spiritual zeal (3:19).

Christ affirmed His love for these indifferent, complacent believers. The word He used for “love” is highly relational, a “brotherly love.” Christ loves even those who aren’t passionately in love with Him. However, those Christ loves He rebukes and disciplines as children (Proverbs 3:11-12; Hebrews 12:5-6). The Laodicean Christians needed to accept that discipline as an indication of Christ’s love and become zealous for Christ. He wanted them to once again become “hot” instead of lukewarm. This return to their original zeal would require a path of repentance.

Jesus knocks on the door of those He loves in order to engage with them in a deep and lasting relationship (3:20).

Christ went on to invite the Laodicean Christians to open the door and enjoy rich fellowship with Him. Verse 20 is well known as a verse of invitation from the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s an invitation first for Christians to “open the door” and enjoy Christ’s intimate fellowship. To open the door is a volitional act of welcoming Jesus into every area of life. Jesus promises to enter into our lives fully when we make ourselves fully available to Him. He also promises to share a meal with us, that is, engage in warm and accepting fellowship. This verse can also apply to those who haven’t yet received Jesus as their Savior. It paints a beautiful picture of Jesus’ welcoming invitation to any who hear His voice to enter into a relationship with Him. Jesus Christ longs for us to have an intimate relationship with Him, but we must respond to His invitation.

**The Lord Jesus Christ comforts the church with
the promise of eternal exaltation with Him on His throne (3:21-22).**

Even for a lukewarm church there’s hope. Jesus reminded the church at Laodicea that He reserves a glorious, exalted position for all true believers.

All true believers will share with Jesus Christ in His millennial reign (3:21).

Those who “overcome” are all true believers because Christians are victorious over sin through faith in Jesus Christ (1 John 5:5). To true Christians, Jesus Christ promises the right to sit with Him on His throne in just the same way that He, by overcoming sin on the cross and overcoming death through His resurrection, sits with God the Father on the Father’s throne. Revelation 22:1 indicates the God the Father and God the Son share a single, eternal, heavenly throne. However, Christ will also have an earthly throne from which He will rule over His millennial kingdom (Matthew 25:31). From that throne believers will share in His reign (2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 20:6). This will be a position of great honor, an exalted position with Jesus Christ. No longer will Christians be downtrodden by the world. Instead, we’ll reign with Christ.

Christians must learn to pay attention to the Holy Spirit’s message to the churches (3:22).

As with each of the other churches Jesus addressed in Revelation 2-3, Jesus concludes His message to the church at Laodicea with a warning for all Christians to listen to the Holy Spirit in this message. What is the Spirit saying to the church today? What is He saying to Christians today? We must be zealous—not indifferent, complacent, or lukewarm—for Jesus. Like the church at Laodicea, we need to rekindle our lost zeal for Jesus Christ.