

Revelation 3 (14-22) – The Church that Jesus Rejects

The book of Revelation is a revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord of His Church. In chapters 2 and 3, Jesus speaks individually to seven different churches. While each letter addresses a particular situation in a particular church, Jesus is pointing in a timeless way to the challenges and potential problems of all of his churches of all times. These letters remain just as relevant today as ever.

In chapter 1, Jesus is revealed in a dazzling portrait of his person, divinity, rule, and work. And the introduction to each letter focuses on the particular thing about his deity that they need to hear about him, in order to endure persecution, remain faithful, and repent where needed.

“*And to the angel of the church, write*”. A messenger from each church was sent to the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos, off the coast of modern-day Turkey, where he was exiled. The messenger would deliver the letter as well as the book of Revelation to their particular church.

The letters were delivered along a postal route. Ephesus received the first letter because it was the closest church from where the Apostle John was. The distance from Ephesus to Smyrna was about 50 miles north, and Smyrna to Pergamum about another 50 miles north. Then from Pergamum you would travel southeast about 40 miles to Thyatira, then 30 more miles southeast to Sardis, and then 30 more miles southeast to Philadelphia, and finally, 40 miles southeast to Laodicea.

Each of these letters starts with an introduction, then there is an examination, an exhortation, and it ends with a motivation. In the letter to Laodicea, the introduction is in vs.14, the examination in vs.15-17, the exhortation is in vs.18-20, and the motivation is given in vs.21-22.

In these letters, the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia received much commendation and no condemnation from Jesus. They weren't perfect, but they were pleasing. But Jesus rebukes, warns, and even threatens the other five of these churches. The church at Ephesus were orthodox in doctrine but they had lost their loving spirit. The church at Pergamum had compromised, seeking the world's favor. The church at Thyatira had become immoral, falling for the world's enticements. This church at Sardis seemed very lively, but it was actually dead. And in this last letter, the church at Laodicea thought they were great, but they were actually gross.

The churches that Jesus rebukes seem to present a downward slide. Ephesus held to right doctrine, but they had become cynical and lacking in a loving spirit. Further down the decline was Pergamum. They were still holding right doctrine, but had begun tolerating sin, compromising with the world. Thyatira had gone even further, where the ways of the world were not only tolerated, but advocated. Sardis had sunk so far down that the church wasn't spiritually alive, with only a few true believers. And Laodicea was the worst; just a self-satisfied group that was a church in name only, where there were no true believers. Whereas Jesus had at least something positive to say about those other four churches he rebuked, he had nothing good to say about Laodicea.

Vs.14 – Jesus starts by giving three descriptions of his deity that Laodicea needed to hear.

The first is “*The words of the Amen*” – the words of the one who is truth itself. This brings you back to Isaiah 65:16, where it says, “*he who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the*

God of truth, and he who takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of truth.” The Hebrew word for truth there is amen. The God of amen. In other words, the God of truth.

Amen is used as an affirmation of truth, and as a sort of punctuation. You hear something in the preaching and you agree wholeheartedly and so you say “amen!” Psalm 106:48 – *Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, “Amen!”* Romans 11:36 – *For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.* Jesus is saying that he himself is the guarantee of God’s promises and the surety of what he is saying to them. 2 Corinthians 1:20 says “*all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.*”

Jesus also calls himself *the faithful and true witness*. This further reinforces his status as the Amen. This takes you back to Revelation 1:5, where Jesus greets the churches as *the faithful witness*. Whatever Jesus speaks is faithful and true, completely trustworthy and perfectly accurate. When Jesus speaks on behalf of God, his testimony is absolutely true.

Jesus declares that he is *the beginning of God’s creation*. When Jesus says that he is *the beginning of God’s creation*, this doesn’t mean that Jesus is the original creation; it means that he is the originator of creation. Jesus wasn’t the first thing created, he was the one who created everything. John 1:3 says, “*All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made*”. Jesus was not made. He was not created by the God the Father, and Jesus did not create himself, he is uncreated. And Jesus was the agent of creation. Hebrews 1:2 says that God *has spoken to us by his Son...through whom also he created the world*. Colossians 1:16 says *all things were created through him and for him*. Jesus is the architect and chief of all creation.

Here is the picture that Jesus wants the church at Laodicea, and all churches of all times, to see. Jesus is the truth himself. He is the guarantee of God, and he speaks the truth of God. He is the source of everything, and he is sovereign over everything.

Why was this so important for the church at Laodicea to know? Because Laodicea was part of a group of three cities that were close to each other geographically. Laodicea was only about ten miles west of Colossae and just six miles south of Hierapolis. The book of Colossians mentions Laodicea 4 times (Colossians 2:1, 4:13, 15-16), and also Hierapolis (Colossians 4:13). And some of the same false teaching that had infected Colossae had probably infected Laodicea as well. That’s why the Apostle Paul told the Colossians to have their letter read to the Laodiceans also.

In the book of Colossians, Paul confronted and corrected the false teaching that denied the full deity of Jesus Christ. The church had been taught that Jesus was a created being, something less than the Almighty. Some said Jesus was a demigod, who had been deified by being filled with a supernatural power, which was available to any and all people. It was human potential dressed in mysticism. And they measured their spirituality in purely pragmatic, humanistic terms.

The point is that since Laodicea was so prosperous, they felt like they didn’t need to listen to anyone else’s counsel. They were doing well. They must be doing things right. But Jesus says this is God Almighty telling you the truth. You think that you must be doing well and good because you are successful and well off in worldly terms, but you are far from it in spiritual terms.

Vs.15-16 – having given a striking introduction, Jesus now gives a scathing examination. He starts the same way as he does in all the letters: he says, *I know your works*. In other words, I have completely and perfectly examined you. And Jesus is not happy with what he sees.

And he says *you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!* Some would take this to mean that Jesus was telling Laodicea to choose a side, to stop being noncommittal, and to either get fired up about serving God, or to just drop the idea altogether. I'm sure that some of you have heard this text used in this way, as a fiery exhortation to the lazy or licentious.

But Jesus doesn't present hot as being good and cold as being bad. No, Jesus presents **both hot and cold** as being *good*, and **lukewarm** as being bad. You see that clearly in vs.16. *So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth*. Jesus wouldn't spit out cold water. There are always people who aren't serving Jesus as well as they could. And most people go through seasons where they are more "on fire" than at other times. So, he isn't telling them that if they don't stay hot that they would go to hell. No, that isn't what he is saying here.

To better understand just how appropriate, powerful, and penetrating his illustration is, it helps to understand a little about the city. Laodicea was situated in a valley, so it was a common travel route, and served as an intersection between Colossae to the east and Hierapolis to the north. Instead of having to travel over the mountains, people would travel through the valley, through Laodicea. And so, Laodicea was a city of great traffic, and it became a commercial hub for finance, clothing, and medicine, and its numerous visitors created an abundance of resources. It was known for its wool. It developed a powerful eye salve. And even when the city was leveled in 60 A.D. by an earthquake, they didn't have to depend on money from Rome in order to rebuild. They were able to rebuild all on their own with their own money. Laodicea was a very rich and proud city.

However, Laodicea had a very poor water supply, because it had no main water supply. The local streams were unable to provide the ever-growing need for water. And so, they built an elaborate underground aqueduct, and water was plumbed in from other places.

Now a very common application of this situation takes this to mean that the water would be cold or hot from the source but then the water would be lukewarm by the time it got to the city. And they point to ancient sediment deposits, the corrosion factor of the pipes, and the probable contamination of the water to justify that claim. So, in effect, Jesus is saying don't be like that bad water you've got in your city. And it makes sense. So, it has become a very popular idea.

However, this isn't actually the case. There are many ancient accounts that actually praise the water of the city, as suitable in both its hot and cold forms. And remember, Laodicea had great wealth, and the fact is that many cities used aqueducts and piped in their water in that day. So, if any city had the resources to make sure its water supply was good, it was Laodicea.

Ok, then, what is Jesus really saying here?

Well, everyone agrees that Laodicea had both hot water and cold water piped in. And we know that both kinds of water were useful and necessary. Hot water was used for bathing and as a means of healing. Cold water was used for drinking and refreshing. But lukewarm water was not useful

at all. No one wanted it. It would make you sick. And people wouldn't have tolerated it in Laodicea. They would complain if the water was lukewarm. This rich city couldn't afford to have bad water.

Imagine if you were staying at a 5-star expensive hotel, and nasty water came out of the faucet or shower. It would be gross. It wouldn't be useful at all. You would complain to the front desk. If it wasn't fixed, you'd leave the hotel. You'd make different arrangements next time you travelled.

So, it's not that Jesus is telling them to get hot. And Jesus isn't saying don't be like that bad water you've got in your city. He is saying something much more. He's not comparing them to the bad water of the city. The issue is that they *wouldn't* tolerate bad water in the city, yet they *did* tolerate "bad water" in the church. It was bad doctrine, a false view of Jesus. And bad practice, as we will see. He is saying that everyone knows how you won't put up with bad water in the city. You've done anything and everything you can to make sure you have a good supply of both hot and cold water. And yet, spiritually speaking, you don't care about it. You dismiss me, the fountain of life, and you think you can run just fine on your own lukewarm water supply. And you're wrong.

No matter what the water situation was in Laodicea, Jesus is saying that the Laodiceans were gross. They weren't useful at all. They weren't like hot water to bathe in, or cold water to drink. They were like nasty, gross, lukewarm water. The very thing they might complain about, physically speaking, was what they were, spiritually speaking. They had refused the living water of Jesus Christ, and instead they were relying on water from their own fountain. They were like Jeremiah 2:13 – *for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.*

They wouldn't tolerate lukewarm water in the city, but they tolerated lukewarm spirituality. They did whatever it took to get the right kind of water. But they didn't really care about serving and worshiping the right Jesus. Their doctrine of Jesus was warped, and their application of the gospel was warped. Their whole life and practice were warped. Again, this isn't about hot or cold. Jesus wouldn't spit out hot water or cold water. This is about usefulness, and necessity, and how their lukewarm ways were neither. Jesus is telling the church at Laodicea that you make me sick.

So, what does Jesus mean by lukewarm? What is it about Laodicea that makes him sick? The answer is in vs.17 – *For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.* They were proud and deceived. They didn't have the right view of Jesus, and they didn't live according to the gospel. They lived like the world, who thought that material blessings indicate spiritual well-being.

Laodicea was a wealthy city, and the church at Laodicea thought their material wealth was a result of their spiritual wealth. They were proud, and deceived into thinking that they were spiritually elevated. They were ascending to a greater spiritual level than other people, and so they had earned and deserved the material blessings they received. The Colossian heresy of Gnosticism, or secret knowledge, might have fooled them into thinking that even though Jesus was a great teacher, who had great power, they could rise even higher than him, and not have to suffer as he did. Sounds like today, doesn't it? So many churches teach that you can follow Jesus on the path of spiritual enlightenment without having to follow him along the path of suffering. But Jesus said if anyone would come after him, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

The Laodiceans resembled Paul's warning in Colossians 2:18-19 – *going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head* (which is Jesus Christ). Jude 1:8 says these people are *relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, and reject authority*. They thought they were spiritually enlightened, but they didn't see the spiritual world well enough to properly assess their own spiritual condition.

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing. The Laodiceans were the worst sort of spiritual hypocrites. They had a false Christ, a false gospel, and a false way of life. And they were self-assured, self-righteous, and self-satisfied about it.

But Jesus said they were *not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked*. Their condition was as bad as it gets. Here is a church who had fully bought into the material mindset. But Jesus had written to other churches that had compromised with the world. Pergamum had compromised with the world. Thyatira had done even worse, and completely capitulated to the culture. So why does Laodicea get the strongest rebuke? Because compromise, capitulation, and the material mindset aren't the worst things a church can do. The worst thing a church can do is to deny the full and absolute deity of Christ. And there are many churches and whole denominations and cults of Christianity that do exactly that. And like Laodicea, those aren't true Christian churches, and they don't have true Christians in them.

Do you know why the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, and the cults like them are not Christian churches, even though they may say they are, and even though they may say great things about Jesus, and even if their people may behave better than we do? Do you want a simple answer as to how to address this issue? Well, instead of trying to count all the good they may do, and comparing all that we may have in common, realize this. It's the same with the world and with all the religions of the world. What they say about Jesus' divinity is the issue. The difference between true Christianity, and the cults and the culture, is not about a better set of morals, it is about a true understanding of God. Once you deny the unique, uncreated, Almighty Christ of the Scriptures, you deny the Bible, the God of the Bible, and the Gospel, and you become like Laodicea. It isn't a weak devotion that makes Jesus sick; it's bad Christology.

Their situation couldn't be worse. What could they do about it? Jesus tells them in vs.18-20.

Vs.18 – *I counsel you to buy from me* – Jesus says stop thinking you have it made without me. You must make me your source, for spiritual wealth, spiritual clothing, and spiritual sight. And the price is free – Isaiah 55:1 – *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.*

- *gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich* – this refers to spiritual wealth, and the true blessings of God, which comes from your relationship with him.
- *white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen* – this refers to spiritual clothing, and instead of our sinful nakedness, the righteousness of Christ is accredited to your account by faith in the sinless life and atoning death of Jesus. Isaiah 61:10 says *my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.*
- *and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see* – this refers to spiritual sight, and the power of the Holy Spirit to help you know and obey the Bible.

Jesus calls them to salvation. And he follows it up in vs.19 – The church that Jesus rejects and the people that Jesus rejects can be turned into the church that Jesus loves and the people that Jesus loves, if they will just turn to him and be saved. If you will turn from your self-assured, self-righteous, and self-satisfied ways, and turn to Jesus, like he says in vs.18, Jesus won't reject you. In John 6:37, Jesus says that *whoever comes to me I will never cast out*. So, take his reproof (in other words, exposing your true condition), and his discipline (the painful process) as signs of his love. And earnestly repent (in other words, turn to him in faith, asking him to forgive your sins, and trusting him as the Lord of your life). No matter who hears this I can truly say that God does have an affection for you. But you must truly turn your life over to him, or he will reject you.

Vs.20 – Jesus gives an invitation. And this isn't simply talking about an individual's heart. He is talking about the church. Laodicea was a church that Jesus wasn't in. He is standing outside the door of the church, and he is knocking. His knocking represents what he has said up to this point in the letter. And he asks if there is anyone who can hear him, and who will open the door. He was shut out of this church that bore his name, but he says he will come in if even one person responds to his call. He was looking for anyone who heard what he has said about their true spiritual condition, and asking if they are willing to do what he has said to remedy it.

If so, if even one person is ready to repent, Jesus will come into that church and have spiritual communion with that person. *If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me*. There are a lot of so-called Christian churches where Jesus is not present today. But Jesus is a part of any church even if they have only one true believer. That doesn't mean that Jesus will be honored in the church by others, or that the whole church is or will be saved. But it does mean that Jesus calls out even to those churches he isn't a part of yet. And he can have fellowship when someone is the only true believer in that church.

Vs.21-22 – Jesus gives his final promise, his final motivation for this letter. *The one who conquers* refers to those who are Christians, those who have heard and obeyed what Jesus said in this letter, which is true of all true Christians. All true Christians have given up their self-assured, self-righteous, and self-satisfied ways, and have made Jesus their source for spiritual wealth, spiritual clothing, and spiritual sight. The trust in the Almighty King of kings, and Lord of lords.

And this is his promise to them. *I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne*. Jesus says that if you truly turn to me, not only will I have fellowship with you now, I will take you all the way to heaven to sit on my throne. Hebrews 1:3 says that after Jesus paid for your sins on the cross, *he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high*. Ephesians 2:6 says that God has *raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places*. This is the true, supreme, and ultimate elevation for humanity. It is the greatest honor any human being could ever receive. It is more than anything this world has to offer, and worth any sacrifice in this world you have to make. Don't fall for the false hope of being elevated in this world. Your works, your wealth, your status, and your success mean nothing without Jesus.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Do you hear his voice? Will you turn to Jesus in repentance and faith? Will you be seated with Christ on his throne in heaven?

You will, but only if you allow Jesus to sit on the throne of your life now.