

## The Discriminating, Jealous King

Revelation 3:14–22

Today we wrap up this series with the letter to Laodicea. These sermons, focused on repentance, have been hard. They don't leave us feeling good about ourselves. Our culture doesn't appreciate that kind of messaging. But Jesus is more concerned that we experience a vital, fruit-bearing, mission-advancing life in the Spirit than he is that we feel good about ourselves. He, on purpose, dents their pride; because it's killing them — and he is certainly going to dent ours, too. Their root sin of pride was producing the rotten fruit self-sufficiency, and they had simply left Jesus outside of his church because they had all they needed apart from him. But he doesn't allow us to work on our own, as though we could figure out his ways were ways if we were clever or rich. His priority is the relationship he calls us to. Out of that productive work flows; apart from him we can do nothing.

Before we read, let's note some things about Laodicea that will make some things jump off the page as we read it. Laodicea was located in the Lycus valley, the largest and most affluent of three sister cities: Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colossae. Hierapolis, up the road just a few miles, enjoyed natural hot springs that were healing for some physical conditions. The water was both hot and contained minerals that didn't taste good but had healing properties. Colossae was a few miles in the other direction and enjoyed cool natural springs that were clean and refreshing. Laodicea's weakness was its water supply; it was not sufficient for the large population. They had to bring water in from 6 miles away through large stone pipes. By the time it arrived it was lukewarm, but still loaded with minerals. It neither tasted good, nor was it refreshing.

Laodicea's location at the juncture of two trade routes made it a very wealthy city. With wealth came research, development, and prestige. In addition to financial prosperity, it had a thriving textile industry. They developed a breed of sheep that produced a unique black wool which was used to make an outer garment. It was a sort of name brand tunic sought by all the fashionistas of the day. They also had a well-known medical school that was forward-thinking and conducted research with the local minerals and resources. The school's faculty produced an eye salve that was widely to treat diseases of the eye. All of this in a pagan environment dedicated to false gods. It was into this culture that Jesus, who sees and knows all things, wrote. He uses illustrations drawn from their culture to help them understand what he is saying how he feels. Most importantly, because he loves them too much to leave them in their spiritual poverty, he calls them to repentance.

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**Revelation 3:14–22** — <sup>14</sup>“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

<sup>15</sup>“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

**PRAY** — Lord, Laodicea thought they were something they were not. You knew their condition and loved them too much to allow them to continue in prideful self-sufficiency. Have mercy on us this morning and reveal any blindness, any pride, and self-sufficiency that disqualifies us from useful service to our King. Help us to embrace the Savior's refining fire, though it may be painful. Give us grace to crave the peaceful fruit of righteousness that comes from your loving discipline. Now, let the book live to me. Show me myself; show me my Savior, and let the book live.

In a now familiar pattern, the letter begins with the revelation of Jesus in **v. 14**. He reveals aspects of his character that have particular application in the church he is addressing: **The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.** *The Amen* is an unusual title that is probably rooted in Isaiah 65:16. *Amen* means true. When we say “amen,” we agree with the truthfulness of what has been said. The Isaiah passage reads, “**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 phrase *the God of truth* is literally translated the God of Amen. Jesus is declaring that what he says is true and in perfect conformity to reality. The next phrase amplifies the title: **the faithful and true witness**. These perfections of Christ — that he is completely truthful and accurate, and that he knows all about them, as **v. 15** describes — stands in contrast to their self-deception that is exposed in **v. 17**. They believed something that was not true. Jesus was letting them know that his assessment was accurate, not theirs.

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The final phrase in that verse, *the beginning of God's creation*, echoes the Christological hymn that we memorized almost 2 years ago in **Colossians 1:15** — **He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup>For by him all things were created...** Why is this significant? Remember that Laodicea and Colossae are sister cities, situated very close to each other. The gnostic heresy gripping Colossae likely was at work in Laodicea, too. Heresies against the eternal, uncreated nature of Christ undermine his authority and present a false Christ that cannot save. So Jesus reminds them that he is the uncreated Creator, as he did also does in John 1.

What does their Creator, who is the God of truth know? He knows their true spiritual condition.

**v. 15** — **I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot.** Like the water that is piped to Laodicea, the Laodicean church is neither cold — which would be useful for refreshing the spiritually weak, the spiritually dry and parched soul — nor are they hot — which would be useful for healing the spiritually sick as the hot springs could heal the physically sick. They neither refreshed nor healed. They were in essence good for nothing. Those with wounded or sick souls, those who were spiritually exhausted and in need of refreshing... when they visited Laodicea on a Sunday morning, seeking rest and recovery from the Lord, found a church pleased with itself, comfortable, with a good giving statement, but the Lord they claimed to serve was nowhere around. Those visitors who sought the Lord left just as broken and parched as they entered. They had every right to expect that the people who claimed to know and worship God would be able to introduce them to the Great Physician — but they didn't. That's because Christ was not even present in their gathering. If we look in **v. 20**, where do we find the Lord? **Behold, I stand at the door and knock.** The Lord was not present in their worship and their programs, and they didn't even realize his absence. In an incredible act of condescension, he stands outside of his church knocking, seeking to gain admission.

His rebuke reveals his expectation for his church: **Would that you were either cold or hot!**

You are to be about the business of caring for souls! Help those who are sin-sick, who are broken and wounded find their way to the Savior who forgives all your sins, who heals all your diseases. Usher people to drink from the springs of living water flowing from the Savior that they may be satisfied and live and be refreshed to serve. Laodicea, you aren't doing that, and I can't stand it.

You would never play a prank like some I might have played in college, because you are mature and kind. But not me; I'm only slightly better now. A friend — or, more accurately, former friend — made a restroom trip while we were eating at a burger joint in Waco. While he was gone someone thought it would be a good idea to empty his cold drink, put some room temp tea in the cup, pour in a bunch of

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salt, and wait for him to take a swig. So we did, and he did. Everyone thought it was funny. Except him. Guess what he did. He spewed the nasty stuff all over the table. It was repulsive. It was worthless. It was a metaphor for Laodicea.

So the Lord says he will spit them out. What does that mean? First, It is not a loss of salvation. Laodicea and Ephesus compare with each other in form. The Lord told Ephesus he would remove their candle stick if they did not repent. He would sweep away that particular church if they didn't return to their first love. God did not need their doctrinal purity without agape love. Spitting the Laodiceans out of his mouth conveys the same idea. I don't need your wealth. You are useless in your present condition. Repent, or I will remove you.

This vivid and colorful statements from the Lord must have absolutely shocked them. I can imagine one of the elders interrupting the reading the letter, saying, "Pardon me, I think there's been a mistake. That's the wrong letter. This is Laodicea." Why were they shocked? Jesus said they had zero awareness of their true condition. Their actual condition is shocking even to our ears: pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. They were the opposite of what they thought of themselves.

**v. 17a** — **For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing...** They were full of pride. And pride produced self-sufficiency; self-sufficiency produced self-deception. But the root is pride.

### **Pride is a blinding sin.**

- If someone from a sister church asked if there was some way they could come alongside them and help them reach the broken, the spiritually impoverished, their response would be, "No, thank you, we've got as evangelism minister who runs that program."
- When someone asked if they could pray for them in some way, they would say, "No, we're good."
- If someone were to see if they needed help with a particular mission activity, it would be, "Thank you, but we have a budget line item to hire that done."

They didn't see, they didn't know their condition because the self-sufficiency, which grew out of the root of pride, blinded them to their true condition. Pride is a blinding sin. But sees, and Jesus knows.

Rather than engage in the hard, but fruitful work of prayer, and the faithful proclamation of the Gospel that brings an end to human pride and confidence, they perceived that their wealth was a sign of

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God's blessing and provision. There are important lessons here on the dangers of wealth. In summary, just one: the blessing of wealth can easily turn into the dulling curse of independence.

Christ calls them away from their pride and disoriented confidence in worldly resources.

**v. 18 — I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich...**

There's so much here! Christ emphatically calls them to himself. He ends their search! Don't look for something somewhere else to try to make a moderate improvement to your condition. Cut out all the foolish experimentation and come to me!

**Buy ... gold refined by fire.** He is talking about gaining true spiritual wealth, not the counterfeit they've settled for. But we don't have the price in our hand to purchase spiritual riches. No one seeks God. No one can buy a right relationship with God. We know this from the whole of scripture, and it is embedded this passage: you are poor, blind, and naked. You have no money. You can't see to find me. You are shamefully naked, lacking any righteousness whatsoever. So why does Jesus tell them to buy spiritual riches from him. **Isaiah 55**, where we began this morning in the Call to Worship, displays the extraordinary and necessary grace God gives to bankrupt, blind, unrighteous sinners. **Isaiah 55:1, 3a — “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.** [skipping to v. 3] **<sup>3</sup> Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live...** How can someone who has no money “buy” anything. It is not that salvation is free. Oh, it's free to you. But salvation was purchased by Jesus through the shedding of his blood. He liberally gives living water. He is the bread of life that satisfies the soul. These pictures and metaphors are simply Jesus saying we are to come to him. Communion with him is what he purchased through his atoning work on the cross. It cost him his life; he is jealous for us and won't settle for anything less than he bought.

- Worldly wealth cannot purchase spiritual righteousness — Righteousness is from Christ. Be clothed in Christ's righteousness — the only righteousness there is — rather than the black wool tunic that you trust to provide greater income.
- Worldly wisdom cannot cure spiritual blindness — sight is from Christ. **John 9:39a — Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see...”** The famous eye salve from the medical school can't help you see your spiritual poverty.

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- Worldly wealth cannot produce spiritual fruitfulness — fruitfulness flows from abiding in Christ. **John 15:4 — Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.**

Jesus's truthful evaluation exposed their nakedness, a picture of their unrighteousness. But God is not shaming them; just the opposite. God is not motivated by a first century cancel culture. He is graciously calling them out of his love to life and fruitfulness. **v.19 — Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline...** Such loving discipline is the Lord's standard practice. As **Hebrews 12** says, he is treating us like his children. What father would allow wayward children to continue walking in waywardness, knowing it was destroying them? The father loves us too much for that.

The call is to repent **now**. Not by degrees or in phases. **Be zealous** in your repentance. In one decisive act turn from pride and self-sufficiency. Do not continue one more day in separating pride. Repentance in pieces is partial repentance, which is no repentance at all. Today, own your utter dependence on Christ. Communion will be immediately restored if we will humble ourselves and open the door to him. If anyone hears — even one — we are immediately back at the table with him.

The closing refrain is familiar to us as something similar appears in the other letters. For Laodicea and every church and believer, the one who conquers — as we saw last week, the one who has been adopted by God, is given citizenship in his kingdom, who is conformed to Christ, hold to their faith and hold to his word — the one who conquers will be pulled up on the throne to reign with Christ. Paul talks about this in **2 Timothy 2:12**.

He who has an ear, listen! Hear his gracious, loving call to repent of pride and self-sufficiency. Apart from Christ you can do nothing. In Laodicea, they were confident in their intelligence and their wealth, not their Savior. How is it with us? What markets or comforts have you been depending on other than Christ? They will not satisfy you because they cannot satisfy you. Come to me, Jesus says. Buy from me. And buy without money. I will satisfy you, and I will give you what satisfies...

### **Our Call to Repent**

God is pleased to draw near to, and revive those who are humble and contrite, who embrace his word and tremble at it. What is revival? It is God in the midst of his people -- his children living in close communion with him, reflecting his glory and orienting their lives first to his kingdom. Is there

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one of us who does not need revival? The scripture tells us God draws near when we honestly understand, own, and confess our pride and disorientation to God, and our incapacity to advance his kingdom in our own power. Coming to grips with the reality of our condition fuels the heart to prayer in order to experience God's power and see his name exalted. We return to his word and to prayer.

Consider the treasure of God's blessing in these passages:

- ... if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)
- For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isaiah 57:15)
- But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2b)

The call to revival is a call to God himself. In Isaiah 63, he pleads with God to draw near and revive them that they may rejoice in him -- not so that their to-do list is reformed or empowered. If we will humble ourselves, pray, seek his face, and turn from our wicked ways we will see God do what only he can do.

Prayerlessness is always a significant sin that must be repented of. Prayerlessness is not rooted in fatigue, busy-ness, or lack of knowledge. Prayerlessness is rooted in pride, and pride gives birth to a thousand enemies of prayer, including arrogance, self-sufficiency, and ingratitude. What enemies of prayer are springing from the deadly of pride in your life? How long have those enemies convinced you they weren't enemies? How long have they convinced you that prayer -- private and corporate -- was not essential for satisfaction in Christ or an open door for ministry? Is today not the day to slay the enemies of communion with Christ and experience, perhaps for the first time, a satisfying, hot passion for Christ out of which others can find satisfaction and life in Christ?

Let's return to God now, repenting of self-sufficiency, prayerless, disorientation to his word. Let's be zealous. He will meet us at the table if we will return to him.