

CHAPTER 3

Jesus' Evaluation of Ministry: Message to the Seven Churches

The Lukewarm Church: A Message to Laodicea

Revelation 3:14-22

Do you believe in yourself? Do you look out for number one? Is the only right way to do something your way? Have you pulled yourself up by your boot straps and accomplished great things because of your many skills? What would you do if after you would have claimed the top of the ladder you found that you went up the wrong building; what do you do? What if all the things that we are trying to attain under the umbrella of God really has nothing at all to do with Him. What if as a church we spend all of our time and resources making people feel good about themselves, or better yet, to believe in themselves.

Do you stand firm on the word of God regardless of your situation or circumstance? Are we so inward focus that we have become the center of our self-created universe? Has the ministry become another place for us to be seen as the super star that we are? Is it all about us, our needs, our desires, or wants, our ambitions, our goals? Have we become so conformed that we cannot tell our own state? Self-delusion in the philosophical stance of the idolater, that one who has made a god in their own image according their own likeness and worships this god and serve him in ministry. This is the church of Laodicea.

One of the worst train disasters in history occurred in the El Toro Tunnel in Leon, Spain, on January 3, 1944. Over five hundred people died.

The train was one of those long passenger trains with an engine on both ends. On this particular day, when the train went into the El Toro Tunnel, the engine on the front stalled. When the front engine stopped, the engineer on the back engine started up his engine to back the train out of the tunnel. At the same time, however, the front engineer managed to get the front engine started again and attempted to continue the journey neither engineer had any way of communicating with the other. Both engineers thought they simply needed more power. They continued to pull in both directions for several minutes. Hundreds of passengers on the train in the tunnel died of carbon monoxide poisoning because the train could not make up its mind which way to go.

The people on that train died because the train had one too many engineers. Many of us struggle as to which way to go with our lives-whether to come to Jesus or to remain in our sin.

This indecision can cause us to miss out on the most important decision in our lives. Sometimes we think we can have it both ways, but we can't. We can't serve God and also serve the devil. Jesus Himself warned us against trying to live a double life: "No one can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24a).¹

Background

Laodicea was founded by Antiochus II in the middle of the third century B.C. and named after his wife Laodice. It was situated about forty miles southeast of Philadelphia on the road to Colossae. Under Roman rule Laodicea had become wealthy and had a profitable business in the production of wool cloth. About 35 years before this letter was written, Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake, but it had the wealth and ability to rebuild. There is no record that Paul ever visited this city, but he was concerned about it (Col. 2:1–2; 4:16).

NOTE: Five Factors in Christ evaluation of the church at Laodicea

1. Christ the eternal and faithful witness (v. 14)

“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

In Christ evaluation of the church at Laodicea He introduced Himself as **the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of God’s creation**. As with the letter to Philadelphia, the characteristic of the Lord is taken from outside the opening vision of Christ. The word “Amen,” meaning “so be it,” refers to the sovereignty of God which is behind human events (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).

2 Corinthians 1:20

For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.

In the Old Testament God is literally, “the God of Amen” (“the God of truth,” Isa. 65:16), who is completely trustworthy and truthful. Now this designation is applied to Christ and contrasts vividly with the untrustworthy Laodiceans.

Isaiah 65:16

“Because he who is blessed in the earth will be blessed by the God of truth; and he who swears in the earth will swear by the God of truth; because the former troubles are forgotten, And because they are hidden from My sight!

¹ Hot Illustrations For Youth Talks, Wayne Rice, Zondervan, pp. 208-209.

John 14:6

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

In speaking of Himself as “the faithful and true Witness” Christ was repeating what He had said earlier (1:5).

Revelation 1:5

And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood

As “the Beginning of God’s creation” Christ existed before God’s Creation and is sovereign over it. The term “beginning” is not referring to a time when Christ was not, nor is it speaking of a time when He came to be for He always was. “Beginning” in this context is speaking of His rank and authority over. In other words Jesus was the one initiating the creative process in the beginning and therefore viewed as ‘the beginning’ (Jn. :1-3). The Greek word (*archē*) translated “beginning” can mean either first in time (beginning) or first in rank (ruler), it could also mean “elementary principle,” “first,” “summary,” “origin,” “first cause,” “authority,” “domain,” and “corner.” This designation is similar to Paul’s teaching in Colossians 1:15, 18 (cf. Rev. 21:6) demonstrating Christ’ authority.

Colossians 1:15-18

15. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16. For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

Revelation 21:6

Then He said to me, “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.

As with four of the churches before, Christ gives a clear description of Himself before handing out a rebuke. Paul had directed that the letter to the Colossians be read by the Christians in Laodicea, Colossians 4:16. The risen Lord may now be appealing to the Laodiceans’ knowledge of the Epistle to the Colossians.

Colossians 4:16

When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.

2. Christ indictment (vv. 15-16)

CHURCH	COMMENDATION	CONDEMNATION
Ephesus	Good works, endurance, discernment	Departed from first love
Smyrna	Faithfulness in persecution	None
Pergamum	Some faithfulness in persecution	Idolatry, false teaching, immorality
Thyatira	Some love, faith, service, endurance	Idolatry, false teaching, immorality
Sardis	Worthy remnant kept clean	Hypocrisy, incomplete works
Philadelphia	Good works, endurance, faithfulness	None
Laodicea	None	Pride, materialism, laziness

15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. **16.** So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

Laodicea receives no commendations from Christ. He indicts based on His knowledge given at the beginning of all the letters, “I know your deeds.” This like in all the letters before demonstrates Christ knowledge of the internal working of the church (the heart of its congregation). Be aware that Christ is not condemning one or two people in the church but His indictment is against the entire church. In this letter we find no word of commendation to the church. Christ viewed this church as detestable (repulsive, revolting, disgusting) because they were **lukewarm**.

The word *lukewarm* (*chliaros*) appears only here in the New Testament. The sense “unusable” or “barren” hits the mark being neither hot nor cold. This was also significant due to the geographical location of Laodicea which was near two other cities Hierapolis, which had a hot medicinal waters; and Colossae which had cold, pure, refreshing water. Both were wonderful. What was terrible was the useless water of Laodicea which was between the two.²

In referring to the church as “lukewarm” Christ had in mind that this was its permanent situation. In their feasts as well as in their religious sacrifices people in the ancient world

² Easley, K. H. (Vol. 12, p. 59).

customarily drank what was either hot or cold—never lukewarm.³

Christ’s warning to **spit them out of His mouth**—literally “vomit”—means that he will judge and reject them for their self-righteousness or self-sufficiency (rather than for their lack of spiritual fervor). The symptoms of their barrenness are specified in verse 17.⁴

3. Christ “evaluation” Rich in this world but of no kingdom value (vv. 17-18)

17‘Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, 18. I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

Notice how the church viewed itself verses Christ view of them. First, the church said, **I am rich, but Christ stated that they were poor**. That is, the church supposed it had such adequate (material) resources that it could do without the Lord’s (spiritual) help. The congregation was like the city, proud of its social status and affluence, boasting that **I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing**. (*When the city of Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake in A.D. 60, it recovered without any imperial disaster aid.*) This is the opposite of the church in Smyrna, which knew of its material poverty. Christ calls the Laodicean church **poor**.

This church had a picture of itself that was not true; they thought that they were clothed in righteousness, but were rather dead man bones. The imagery is drawn from what we know of Laodicea, renowned for its extensive textile industry, particularly of black wool fabric. Instead, the Lord understood that it was spiritually **wretched, pitiful and naked**.

It supposed itself to have spiritual insight. Instead it was **blind**. The city of Laodicea was famous for its medical school that exported a powder used for eye salve. Such medicine could not salve their blind eyes. Even sadder than these three deficiencies is Christ’s declaration that **you do not realize** it. This church had deceived itself about its spiritual condition. Because they had depended on themselves, they were impoverished, unclothed, and sightless. Christ rejects whatever a church is or does that is prompted by self-righteousness.⁵

According to Walvoord “their being lukewarm spiritually was evidenced by their being content with their material **wealth** and their being unaware of their spiritual poverty. Christ used strong words to describe them: **wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked**.”⁶

Walvoord stated that:

They were urged to buy not ordinary gold, but **refined** gold, referring to that which

³ Walvoord, J. F. (Vol. 2, p. 940).

⁴ Easley, K. H. (1998). *Revelation* (Vol. 12, p. 59). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁵ Easley, K. H. (Vol. 12, pp. 59–60).

⁶ Walvoord, J. F. (Vol. 2, p. 940).

would glorify God and make them truly rich. Through its banking industry the city had material wealth. But the church lacked spiritual richness. Though they had beautiful clothes, they were urged to wear **white clothes** (cf. v. 4), symbolic of righteousness which would cover their spiritual **nakedness**. As wool was a major product of the area, Laodicea was especially famous for a black garment made out of black wool. What they needed instead was pure white clothing.⁷

4. Christ warning to repent (v. 19)

‘Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

Proverbs 3:12

The Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.

Hebrews 12:7-11

7. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom *his* father does not discipline? 8. But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? 10. For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He *disciplines us* for *our* good, so that we may share His holiness. 11. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

5. Christ invitation and promise (vv. 20-22)

20. **‘Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me. 21 ‘He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22. ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ ”**

The picture Christ now paints is one of Him being on the outside of the hearts of the Laodiceans. **“I stand at the door and knock.”** It is clear that if one is standing on the outside of a door they are not in the house. So even though this church was claiming Christ, Christ was not residing within them. **“If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him and he with Me.”** This offer makes it clear that Christ was not yet invited into their hearts; so even though they may have believed that they were serving Christ they had no relationship with Him. Hence, **“if anyone hears my voice,”** for His voice was foreign to them. That is why He gives the invitation, **“I will come in and will dine with him and he with Me.”** Only to those who overcome this world does Christ grant permission to dine with Him and become part of the Father’s house. Once again the invitation to listen and respond is given: **He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**

⁷ Walvoord, J. F. (Vol. 2, pp. 940–942).

Walvoord stated it best:

The letters to the seven churches are a remarkably complete treatment of problems that face the church today. The recurring dangers of losing their first love (2:4), of being afraid of suffering (2:10), doctrinal defection (2:14–15), moral departure (2:20), spiritual deadness (3:1–2), not holding fast (v. 11), and lukewarmness (vv. 15–16) are just as prevalent today as they were in first-century churches. Because these letters come from Christ personally, they take on significance as God’s final word of exhortation to the church down through the centuries. The final appeal is to all individuals who will hear. People in churches today would do well to listen.⁸

⁸ Walvoord, J. F. (Vol. 2, p. 942).