

The Church That Nauseates God

Revelation 3:14-22

Introduction: 1) “You nauseate me!” “You make me sick!” “When I see you I want to vomit!” Not exactly words of compliment and praise are they? Tragically, these are the very words spoken by the risen and glorified Christ to His church in the city of Laodicea. Their spiritual condition was nauseating. It made Christ ill. Sadly, they were unaware of their true, spiritual status. They believed things were fine. Great! But, Jesus says no. You are like the lukewarm, unfit drinking water that your city is infamous for. You are not like the cold refreshing springs of Colossae or the hot healing waters of Hierapolis. You are lukewarm and I will not stomach this. For this kind of church there is not a single word of commendation. Not one. Only censure and condemnation comes from the mouth of “The Amen, the faithful and true Witness” (v.14).

2) No church should be happy with itself, satisfied with who or where it thinks it is. I have heard more than once denominational leaders say, “Well, we may not be much, but we are the best God has.” The first part of that sentence contains more truth than the latter. It is always dangerous when we think we are something special to God. We should continually remind ourselves that we are nothing apart from Him. We, in our sin, are easily deceived. Our God does not need us. He will

not share His glory with another. No, we all desperately need Him. We all need to pursue His glory.

3) Like the previous 6 letters in Revelation 2-3, this letter follows a similar pattern, minus any word of praise. Their condition is critical but not terminal. Christ has the spiritual medicine and remedies for their healing if they will listen (v. 22) and act (vs. 18-19) on His counsel.

I. Christ is characterized by His dependability

Our Lord addresses the angelic watcher and protector of the church at Laodicea. The historical context of the city will be important to the imagery our Lord uses in His criticism and correction.

Laodicea was located in the Lycus Valley along with the cities of Hierapolis and Colossae. It was approximately 300 miles east of Athens and 600 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Two important imperial trade routes converged here.

The city was a wealthy commercial center, the richest in Phrygia (Mounce, 107). It was known for banking, the manufacturing of clothing (esp. black wool), and a famous medical school with ointments for the ears and the eyes.

So wealthy was the city that following a devastating earthquake in AD 60, Laodicea rebuilt itself without any assistance from Rome (Johnson, EBC, 634-35). The Roman historian Tacitus said of her, “Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us.” (*Ann. XIV. 27*).

The city and church were alike. They saw themselves as self-sufficient. They did not need the help of anyone including God. They were just fine all by themselves. The church, for sure, was badly deceived.

Despite its prosperity, the city did have one major weakness: an absence of an adequate and convenient source for good drinking water. By means of aqueducts, it got its water from either the hot springs of Hierapolis which cooled to lukewarm, or it came from a cooler source in Colossae that warmed to lukewarm. For all its wealth, the city had very poor drinking water. The water was so distasteful that visitors, not prepared for its tepid flavor, would often vomit after drinking it (Johnson, BSC, 62; Swindoll, 78).

The Bible does not reveal when or how the church began here. It is likely it was planted by Epaphras (Col. 1:7, 4:12-15) whom Paul may have evangelized on his 3rd missionary journey while ministering at Ephesus (Acts 19). Indeed, all three churches in the Lycus Valley (Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse) were probably established at the same time by this faithful brother (Mounce, 202).

Still, the origin of the church at Laodicea remains a mystery. To this church, and those like it, Christ has significant criticism, but He also has words of promise and assurance. There are two. Those who have ears should carefully listen.

1. You can trust what He says.

“The Amen (*amen*), the faithful and true Witness” recognizes in Jesus what is sure and valid, true and trustworthy. It affirms what is certain, reliable, true to reality. “Amen” is a Christological title, and it is always the appropriate human response to divine word and action. The title is unique and reflects Isaiah 65:16 (MacArthur, 133). In applying this title to Himself, Christ affirms He is the answer to all the promises of God. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20, “For all the promises of God in Him [Jesus] are yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.” As the Amen, He also is the “faithful and true Witness.” This looks back to 1:5. This description stands in stark contrast to the true condition of the Laodicean church. He is reliable, they are not. He is faithful, they are not. He is the True Witness; but they have no real witness at all. You may not trust the dependability, words and witness of Laodicean Christians, but you can count on and trust what Jesus says.

2. You can trust what He starts.

“The Originator (Gr. *arche*) of God’s creation echoes Colossians 1:15, 18, which affirm Christ as the chief, the ruler, the originator of both Creation and the Church. He is Lord over both the material and the spiritual realm. Colossae was infected with a Christological heresy. It

appears to have denied the full deity and eternality of the Son on one hand, and questioned the genuineness of His complete humanity on the other. Like this heresy of Arius in AD 325 and modern Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, they said, "there was a time when the Son was not," and "God was not always a Father." Laodicea, being in close proximity, no doubt, also faced this false teaching. Our Lord corrects this deviant teaching and asserts He is not a creature or a part of creation. He is its beginning, its creator, its originator. Whether it be Creation or the Church, He is Lord, ruler, chief. He is first in time and position. Laodicean Christians forget or ignore the exalted and preeminent place that belongs only to Jesus. They lost sight of who He is and what He has done and is doing. What He starts He will complete. What He begins He will finish. Laodicean Christians may stop before completing their task, but not Jesus. What He has created and what He has saved He will stay with and sustain to the end. Can the same be said of us? (Beale has a great discussion on the Old Testament background to these titles, 297-301; I do see things a bit differently than does he).

II. **Christ condemns those who are deceived.** **3:15-17**

When Jesus examines a Laodicean Church or Christian, He sees nothing to praise or commend; not one single thing. Everything is a stench to His nostrils, an ache to His heart, nauseating to His stomach. How is it that a church can get into such a deplorable condition and, unbelievably, not even know it? Our Lord provides 2 indications that should serve as warnings to all of us.

1. **Jesus knows what we are doing** 3:15-16

As with every church, Jesus knew the spiritual condition of Laodicea. “I know your works.” What kind of shape were they in? They were “neither cold nor hot.” Instead they were “lukewarm,” tepid, moderate. This text has been misinterpreted more often than not. Many believe what Jesus means is I would rather you be cold and in opposition to me or hot and on fire for me. However, it is hardly conceivable that Jesus would say to His church “be cold and oppose me.” It is better to interpret the statement against the historical and geographical background of Laodicea. Hot, medicinal waters bubbled up at nearby Hierapolis, while cold, pure waters flowed from Colossae. Our Lord’s point to them is something like this: You are providing neither refreshment for the spiritually thirsty nor healing for the spiritually sick. You are spiritually

lukewarm and I will not tolerate you. If you do not repent (v. 19) I will spew you out, vomit you out of my mouth. You are sickly and insipid. I will not tolerate your condition any longer. You are flat and unsavory. You badly misrepresent the life changing power of the gospel and the refreshment and healing it brings.

Application: We must not be indifferent or ignorant to our spiritual condition, but continually take inventory in the light of God's Word. We must face up to our true spiritual condition. Jesus knows who we are and what we are doing.

2. Jesus knows who we think we are. 3:17

Indifference will eventually lead to ignorance concerning where we are spiritually. We may say one thing when the truth is altogether something different. We may fool others and we may even fool ourselves, but we cannot fool God.

Laodicean Christians are deceived Christians. A comparison of their self-estimation with that of the Lord is tragic and sobering. They could not have been more off base in who they thought they were. "You say, I'm rich, I have become wealthy and in need of nothing." Like your city you boast about who you are and what you have. You think every church should be just like us. It should not escape our eye that the Laodicean Christians claim to have reached this lofty spiritual status on their own.

They needed nothing or no one, including the Lord. They had arrived at where they were without the assistance or help of anyone. They may have been a great organization, but they were not a great church; not in our Lord's estimation.

The Lord Jesus, indeed, has a completely different perspective on this church. His evaluation of their true condition was 180° from theirs; polar-opposites.

“You don't know.” You say one thing but the truth is another. A cloud of self-deception hovers over you. “Let me set the record straight” says the Lord Christ. Five marks of their true spiritual status are noted:

- 1) wretched – miserable, unfortunate; a word used of ravaged lands, devastated countries, pillaging.
- 2) pitiful – pitiable, the object of extreme pity.
- 3) poor – speaks of extreme poverty, like a beggar or pauper; a slap at a city that bragged of its wealth, commerce and banking industry.
- 4) blind – a dig at a city that prided itself on its ophthalmic school and famous Phrygian eye powder.
- 5) naked – ridicule of a city that boasted of its famous glossy black wool.

(The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key To The Greek New Testament, 622).

Using imagery and illustrations that would hit them right between the eyes and right where they lived, our Lord exposes their spiritual destitution, deception and desperate condition. In John 9:39 Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” Jesus has judged the Laodiceans. Now they know who they really are. They can no longer plead ignorance. Action is now called for. And one thing is certain, things will not stay the same. Our Lord will make sure of that. Vance Havner puts the issue in plain view, “Smyrna was a rich poor church and Laodicea was a poor rich church. They were blind, shortsighted. They had no vision of God, of their own hearts, of the world’s need. I’d rather be a rich poor Christian than a poor rich Christian!” (*Repent or Else!*, 82-83).

III. Christ counsels those who are deficient. 3:18-19

“Sustained irony runs through verses 17 & 18” (Mounce, 111). The arrogant attitude and smug satisfaction of Laodicean Christianity is confronted and countered with counsel that they make specific purchases from Jesus in precisely those areas where they are so certain they have no need. The

wisdom our Lord shares is instructive for each and every one of us. Every church should receive this as a personal word. So should every Christian.

1. We need Christ's riches. 3:18

“I advise you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire so that you may be rich.” “From Me,” from Christ, true and lasting riches can be purchased. The currency of that purchase is always the same: faith, trust, radical dependence on Him and only Him. Because gold is often an emblem of faith, some believe the Laodicean church was filled only with unbelievers. (MacArthur pushes in this direction, 138). This is certainly possible. I would suspect the church had both believers and unbelievers, and the cure for their spiritual poverty is the same. First comes faith for salvation then follows faith for sanctification. As Paul said in Romans 1:17, salvation is “from faith to faith.” Hebrews 12:2 says we “look unto Jesus the author and finisher of faith.” We need the spiritual riches and wealth that comes only by constant and abiding faith in Jesus. Such wealth, unlike earthly riches, will last and endure forever. Day by day we must renew our faith in the Lord Jesus for everything that we need.

2. We need Christ's righteousness. 3:18

Next Jesus tells the church they need “white clothes so that you may be dressed and your shameful nakedness not be exposed.” In contrast to the beautiful glossy black wool the Laodiceans were so proud of, Jesus offers a garment of white that will cover the shame of their nakedness. White clothes or garments symbolize the imputed righteousness of the Savior and the righteous acts of the saints (cf. 3:4, 5; 3:18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:8, 14). That this is a reoccurring theme in Revelation tells us how important it is. Nakedness in the ancient world was a sign of judgment and humiliation. To receive fine clothing was a symbol of honor and acceptance. Laodicean Christians walk about spiritually naked, completely unaware of their humiliation and need for the pure white righteousness that is available only in Jesus (Mounce, 111). Before the One whose “eyes are a flame of fire” (1:14), we are stripped naked and exposed for who we really are. We dare not stand in the filthy rags of our own righteousness and good deeds. We desperately need the righteousness of Jesus.

3. We need Christ's remedy. 3:18

We also need to buy from Christ, “ointment to spread on our eyes so that we may see.” Laodicea was famous for its eye salve called “Phrygian

Powder.” The Laodicean church was blind to its spiritual condition. Only the great physician had a cure for their sightlessness. The blindness of their self-deception could only be remedied by the healing ointment made available by Jesus (Mounce, 111). Such healing comes from looking to Him in the gospel and into His Word for instruction and wisdom (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Honest evaluation is essential for spiritual restoration. Spiritual compromise and complacency are “spiritual cataracts” that shut out the light of spiritual sight. Regularly, daily, we need to ask the Lord: 1) in prayer and 2) by the Word: show me my true spiritual condition. Reveal to me my spiritual blindspots and areas of sin where I no longer see. Help me Lord to see myself as you see me! “Open my eyes Lord and let me see Jesus,” then I will see who I am and where I really stand before you.

4. We need Christ’s rebuke. 3:19

“As many as I (myself) love...” Amazingly Christ loves Laodicean Christians and churches. Their sin does not quench His love. “I rebuke (pre. tense) and discipline (pre. tense)” says the Lord Jesus. Christ corrects and disciplines, as with a child, those He loves. This echoes Proverbs 3:11-12 and also Hebrews 12:5ff (cf. also 1 Cor. 11:32). Love is never cruel but it can be tough. Discipline that educates and brings about

repentance and change is what our Lord extends to Laodicean churches.

If we reject his discipline He will spit us out. If we receive it, He will come in and stay with us as the next verse beautifully promises.

Our expected response is crystal clear:

“Be committed (*ESV*, “zealous” pre. imp.) and repent (pre. imp.)” Be fervent and turn now and ... daily, keep on, with fire in your soul, turning from sin. Turning from sin once is not enough. It must become the daily practice and habit of our life. A community of daily repenting sinners characterizes a healthy church and healthy Christians.

IV. Christ challenges those who need direction. 3:20-22

These verses are an appropriate conclusion not only to the church at Laodicea, but the letters to all the 7 churches. Yet, it is specifically and definitely right for this church. What does Jesus say? How does He challenge them?

1. Jesus will always come in if we invite Him. 3:20

- “Listen” Jesus says. It is an imperative of command. Look! See! Take note! Wake up! (*ESV*, “behold”). “I stand (perf. tense) at the door and knock” (pre. tense). I have taken a position outside the door of the church and I will remain here knocking and knocking;

graciously and patiently waiting. “If anyone!” What an amazing promise. Just one, anyone. “Hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and have dinner (*ESV*, “eat”) with him, and he with Me.” It appears only one humble, receptive, repentant sinner is necessary to spark revival within a local church. The Master is calling. Are we listening? Are we willing to welcome Him back into His church?

- The debate over whether this verse is to be exclusively applied to a local church and not an individual sinner is really unnecessary when the verse is taken as a whole. It should be recognized it is the church and its individual members who are being addressed. I doubt, however, it is inappropriate imagery in application to any sinner Christ seeks table fellowship with.
- In the Middle Eastern world, an invitation to share a meal was characteristic of hospitality and the occasion for intimate fellowship with family and close friends. For believers, enjoying table fellowship in communion (Matt.26; Mark14; Luke 22; 1 Cor. 11) with Jesus and spiritual brothers and sisters is a foretaste of a future table fellowship in the Messianic Kingdom and the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (19:1-10). It is hard to imagine any follower of the Lamb

rejecting this incredible invitation to dine at the table of the King
(Mounce, 113-114).

2. Jesus will allow us to reign with Him if we trust Him 3:21-22

The one who is a “victor”, an overcomer, a conqueror, Jesus promises the privilege of sitting with Him on His throne as He has sat down with his Father on His throne (v.21). To sit “with Jesus” means any and every blessing we receive in Kingdom life we receive by virtue of our union with Christ. Our joint-reign with King Jesus rings throughout Revelation (1:6, 9; 2:25-27; 5:10; 20:4-6) as well as the New Testament (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:28-30; Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12). And, we are victors because of the victory “He won.” As the Son shares the throne of His Father, we share the throne of the Son (Johnson, BSC, 65). It is astonishing! Because of our union with the victorious Lamb, we not only get heaven, we get a throne.

“Anyone who has an ear ---individuals and churches (plural) should listen to what the Spirit says to the church.” This is a word for all of us.

Are we listening?

Conclusion

A church or a Christian must be careful not to lose their first love (Ephesus). It must trust God in the midst of suffering (Smyrna). It must not compromise its

doctrine (Pergamum). It must not waffle on its morality (Thyatira). It must be on guard against spiritual deadness (Sardis). It must walk through open doors for sharing the gospel (Philadelphia). It must avoid at all costs becoming lukewarm in its passion for Jesus (Laodicea).

Revival is both an individual and church matter. God deals with people one person at a time. He deals with churches one church at a time. Sometimes, like Laodicea, we have everything in our life and in our Church except the Lord Jesus. God forbid that that would be true of us, of you, or of me. Dr. Havner puts it all in context, “The big question today is not “Is God speaking?” The really big question is, “Are you listening?” (102).