

“The Church That Makes God Sick” (Revelation 3:14-22)

Introduction

Their condition was nauseating and they made God ill to His stomach. They were a little too cold to be hot and a little too hot to be cold. They were a little too bad to be good and a little too good to be bad. They neither loved God fervently nor hated Him zealously. They were lukewarm, moderate, indifferent, neutral, complacent, self-satisfied and they made God sick. This is the church at Laodicea.

God is displeased with a church (or a Christian) that is happy with itself, happy where it is and happy with what it has done. No church has ever arrived this side of the coming of the Lord, yet far too many churches appear to be consumed with one passion: maintaining the status quo. Satisfied with their past they are content with their present. Vance Havner sizes up the spiritual condition of such a church and simply notes, “A church like that always needs a revival.” Duncan Campbell described revival as “a community saturated with God.” If his definition is accurate, and it seems pretty good to me, our nation is a nation filled with churches desperately in need of revival. There are far too many Laodicean churches in our day. There was one Laodicean church in the 1st century. There are tens of thousands in the 21st century.

Transition

What word does the Lord have for us in terms of diagnosis and cure for this spiritually nauseating condition?

I. Christ is characterized by His dependability. 3:14

Angel – (*angelo*) – messenger, representative, pastor/leader

Church – (*ekklesia*) – congregation, assembly, local body/bride of Christ

Write – (aor. imp.) – word of urgency and authority

The Laodiceans – 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. It was known for banking, the manufacturing of clothing (esp. black wool), and a famous medical school with specialized ointments for the ears and the eyes. So wealthy was the city that following a devastating earthquake in AD 60, Laodicea rebuilt herself without any assistance at all from Rome. 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 alike saw themselves as self-sufficient. They did not need the help of anyone including God. They were just fine all by themselves.

But the city did have one major weakness: a lack of an adequate and convenient source for water. A six-mile-long aqueduct supplied water from the south. It

came either from hot springs and cooled to lukewarm or it came from a cooler source but warmed in the aqueduct on the way. 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.

The Bible does not reveal when or how the church began here. Most believe it was started by Epaphras (Col. 1:7, 4:12-15) whom Paul may have evangelized on his 3rd missionary journey while ministering at Ephesus (Acts 19). There is no evidence that Paul visited the church, but he did write them a letter (Col. 4:15) which apparently has been lost to us, unless the letter is Ephesians which was a circular epistle meant for Ephesus and other churches in the surrounding area.

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To this church, Christians and those like it, Christ has 2 words of promise and assurance.

1. You can trust what He says.

The Amen (*amen*) – to recognize what is sure and valid, true and trustworthy. It affirms what is certain, reliable, true to reality. It is the appropriate human response to divine word and action. The title is unique and reflects Isaiah 65:16. In applying this to Himself, Christ affirms He is the answer to all the promises of God. As Paul says in II Cor. 1:20, “For all the promises of God in Him are yes, and in Him Amen, to the glory of God through us.” As the Amen, He 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, they have no witness at all. You may not trust the words and witness of Laodicean Christians, but you can trust what Jesus says every time.

2. You can trust what He starts.

The beginning (*arche*) of the creation of God. These words echo Col. 1:15, 18, which affirm Christ as the chief, 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 heresy that denied the full deity and eternity of the Son. Like this heresy of Arius in AD 325 and modern Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, the heretics 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, 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 lose 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 completeing the task, but not Jesus. What He has created and what He has saved He will stay with to the end. Can the same be said of us?

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

When Jesus examines a Laodicean Church/Christian, He sees nothing to praise or commend; not one single thing. Everything is a stench to his nostrils, a pain 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. **Don't be indifferent to your spiritual condition. 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 hot nor cold. Instead they were lukewarm, tepid, moderate.

This text has been misinterpreted in my opinion 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 at 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 may not care about your spiritually lukewarm status but I do and I will not tolerate you. If you do not repent (v. 19) I will spew you, vomit you out of my mouth. You are sickly and insipid, and I will put up with you in this condition no longer. You are flat and unsavory. You have sat, soaked and soured and are content to be as you are.

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Don't be indifferent to your spiritual condition. Take inventory in the light of God's word and face up to your true spiritual condition.

2. **Don't be ignorant of your spiritual condition. 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. Indeed, 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 am rich, have become (perf. tense) wealthy and have (pre. tense) need of nothing. Like your city you brag about who you are and what you have. "We are big and bad, spiritual and mature, oh that every church was just like us. Look at our budget and buildings, take note of our programs and ministries, why the movers and shakers of the community worship here." It should not escape our eye that the Laodicean Christian claims to have reached his lofty spiritual status on their own and that they needed nothing or no one, including the Lord.

The Lord Jesus, however, has a completely different perspective on this church and the picture is not pretty.

Do you not know (realize) that you (yourself, emp.) are spiritually (5 things):

- 1) wretched – unfortunate, used of ravaged lands, devastated countries, pillaging.
- 2) Miserable – pitiable, the object of extreme pity and compassion.
- 3) Poor – extreme poverty, poor as a beggar or pauper, a slap at a city that bragged of its wealth, commerce and banking industry.
- 4) Blind – a slap at a city that prided itself on its ophthalmic school and famous Phrygian eye powder.
- 5) Naked – a slap at a city that boasted of its famous glossy black wool.

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 and now the ball is in their court. They cannot plead ignorance. Action is called for, one way or the other. And one thing is certain, things will not stay the same. Our Lord will make sure of that. Vance Havner again 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!”

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

Sustained irony runs through both v. 18 & 19. 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. Let’s make it personal.

1. **You need Christ’s riches. 3:18**

I counsel (advise) you to buy from Me gold refined (perf. tense) in the fire that you may be rich. “From Me,” from Christ can true and lasting riches 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 not lax but lost, not carnal believers but natural unbelievers. I would suspect the church was filled with both 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 faith in Jesus. Such wealth, unlike earthly riches, will last and

endure forever. Day by day we must have faith in the Lord Jesus for everything that we need.

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

"White garments ... shame of your nakedness ..." 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 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). 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. For all our Sunday finery and show, we are stripped naked before Him 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. You need Christ's restoration. 3:18

Anoint your eyes with eye salve that you may see – famous for its eye salve called "Phrygian Powder," the Laodiceans were blind to their spiritual condition. Only the great physician had a cure for this condition. The blindness of their self-deception could only be remedied by the healing ointment made available by Jesus. Such healing comes from looking into His Word.

Application

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 I no longer see. Help me Lord to see myself as you can see me! "Open my eyes Lord and let me see Jesus," then I will see who and where I really am before You.

4. You need Christ's rebuke. 3:19

As many as I (myself) love (lit. "I," as many as I love) amazingly Christ loves Laodicean Christians and churches.

I rebuke (pre. tense) and chasten (pre. tense). Christ corrects and disciplines as with a child those He loves. This echoes Prov. 3:11-12 and also Heb. 12:5ff (cf. also 1 Cor. 11:32). Love is never cruel but it can be stern. 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.

Be 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.

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

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

1. **I will come in if you invite me. 3:20**

Behold (aor. imp.) see, look, take notice

I stand (perf. tense) – He has taken up a position outside the door of His church and He will not move. He will keep standing there.

Knock (pre. tense) – I keep on knocking and I permanently stand. As in Holman Hunt's famous picture, *The Light of the World*, Christ, the Lord and Savior of the Church stands outside, gently, graciously, lovingly and persistently knocking.

If anyone – amazing! Only one is needed to spark revival. Only one humble, repentant heart is necessary to let the Master in. *The debate over whether this verse is to be exclusively applied to a local church or an individual sinner is unnecessary when the text is taken as a whole. Indeed the highly individual focus on verse 20 cannot be denied.

Hears my voice – not only is He knocking, He is calling as well.

Opens the door – The Lord Jesus does not knock down the door, He requests an invitation to come in person by person, individual by individual.

I will come in ... the response of Jesus to any open door is to enter and join in in table fellowship. In the Oriental world, sharing the main meal was an occasion for intimate fellowship with ones closest and best friends. For the believer, enjoying daily fellowship with Jesus around the dinner table of your heart is a foretaste of the fellowship and intimacy we will enjoy in His messianic kingdom.

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I will come in if you invite me. That is true for a sinner, a believer, and a church!

2. **You can reign with me if you trust me. 3:21-22**

Overcomes (pre. part) – conquers, is the victor

Grant – give, give as a gift

To sit with Me – all we get, we get with Jesus. Our joint reign has already been highlighted in 1:6,9; 2:25-27 and will appear again in 5:10, 20:4-6. It is a constant theme throughout the New Testament as seen in Luke 22:28-30; Rom. 8:17; 2 Tim. 2:12.

On My throne as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

As the Son shares the throne of the Father, we share the throne of the Son. Jesus overcame the world through suffering the death of the cross (John

16:33) and because of Him and what He has done, we not only get heaven, we get a throne!

He who has an ear --- churches (plural) – this is a word for all of us.

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), or its morality (Thyatira). It must be on guard against spiritual deadness (Sardis), walk through open doors for sharing the gospel (Philadelphia) and avoid at all costs becoming lukewarm in its passion for Jesus (Laodicea).

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