

## VISION OF JESUS — VIEW OF HIS CHURCH

### 11. His View of the Church in Laodicea: The Church That Made Jesus Sick Revelation 3:14-22

Let's grab our Bibles and turn to the book of Revelation, chapter 3!

This morning we are in our 11<sup>th</sup> installment of our study of the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation titled: "A Vision of Jesus — His View of the Church."

We're going to be looking at the last of the seven letters that Jesus wrote to seven churches in Asia Minor at the close of the first century.

Here's the preamble for each of these studies!

We want to remember that each of these very real 1<sup>st</sup> century churches possessed strengths and weaknesses common to all of the churches in the decades, centuries and millennia that followed. Each of those churches had a pastor, a personality, and problems that would be common to churches way beyond the 1<sup>st</sup> century. That means that the words of Jesus to those 1<sup>st</sup> century churches speak to us as a church and as individuals. Above all — we need to remember that the words of Jesus to those 1<sup>st</sup> century churches are the living, powerful and enduring Word of God — they're a divine diagnostic by which every church in every age can discern their true spiritual condition.

**The challenge TO US** in each of these letters is: *"What kind of a church are WE? What kind of a Christian am I?"*

In each of these letters Jesus lets each church know who HE is and then He tells them who THEY are — not who THEY think they are — but who He KNOWS them to be.

REMEMBER how the whole book of Revelation opened

*Revelation 1:4; 10-11 (ESV) <sup>4</sup>John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne.... <sup>10</sup>I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet <sup>11</sup>saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna*

*and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.”*

Let’s look take a quick 30,000 ft. look at the journey that this collection of letters made through Asia minor

The letter made its way from the isle of Patmos to the church in Ephesus. The church in Ephesus was the picture of orthodoxy; doctrinally sound. They were the “first church of the right on” — moral and hardworking. But Jesus told them that they had **left** their first love. They’d left love they had for each other when they first met Jesus — and most importantly — they’d left the love they had for Jesus when they first met Him.

From there it made its way to the church in Smyrna. The church in Smyrna was a suffering church. They were afflicted, slandered, impoverished, yet they were spiritually rich. There are churches like Smyrna in the 21<sup>st</sup> century located in the 10/40 window — A geographical part of North Africa, the Middle East and Asia between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north latitude where the majority of the world's Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists live.



To the suffering church in Smyrna at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century — and to the suffering churches at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century — Jesus says, “Be faithful.”

From Smyrna the letters traveled to the city of Pergamum. Kevin DeYoung described the church in Pergamum as being much like an *ungrounded college*

*ministry church, passionate but compromised* — accommodating the sexual immorality and idolatry of 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. To the church in Pergamum — and to such churches today — Jesus says: “Be discerning.”

From Pergamum the letters traveled to the church in Thyatira. This church was strong in love and faith and service and perseverance, but they permitted and endorsed teaching and behavior that the Scriptures did not endorse. To them and to us Jesus says, “Hold fast to the truth — Think.”

From Thyatira the letters traveled to Sardis. The church in Sardis was once flourishing in their relationship with Jesus and in His mission. But by the time Jesus writes to them they were like a star that had long ago gone out. To them and to us, Jesus says, “Wake up.”

From Sardis the letters traveled to Philadelphia. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the church in Philadelphia would be a small, storefront church in a rundown part of the city. They were weak as man would measure strength (microscopic strength) — but they had kept the word of God and they never denied all that Jesus. The church in Philadelphia was struggling but they were strategic in the mission of Jesus — and He was going to open doors of opportunity to them. To them and to us, Jesus says, “Press on.”

Up to this point (and in the seventh and final of these churches) we have an amazing description of churches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Before we dive into the letter of Jesus to the church in Laodicea I want us to read something I came across in preparing for this morning that I thought it would give us a great window through which we can look at and process this last letter

*So you see some strange guy walking down the street.  
You can't help but notice that he is wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and  
naked. He's all banged up from encounters with light posts and mailboxes,  
bruised and wounded. You approach him and say, "Sir, may I help you?" His  
answer is, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing."~ Ray Ortlund*

I cannot overstate the fact that in these letters we see how our Jesus understands the history and the culture in which His people live. In these letters He spoke His living, powerful Word to these churches — showed them their spiritual condition

and made promises to them in terms that they could immediately associate with the unique historic and cultural context in which they lived. We see Jesus doing the same thing in this final letter.

## THE CITY OF THE CHURCH

**LAODICEA** was one of three famous cities of the Lycus Valley Hieropolis, Colossae and Laodicea.

**William Barclay** — It was situated literally astride the great road to the east which went straight through Laodicea, entering by the Ephesian Gate and leaving by the Syrian Gate. That in itself would have been enough to make Laodicea one of the great commercial and strategic centres of the ancient world.<sup>1</sup>

Laodicea was one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world. It was so wealthy that when it was devastated by an earthquake in 61 AD it didn't need to ask Rome for any help, which was unheard of. As far as every other city was concerned all the wealth was in Rome, so if there was a disaster, you had to plead with Rome to come save you. But not Laodicea. They didn't need Rome's help. They said, "We can save ourselves. We can rebuild our own city." The Roman historian Tacitus wrote

*"One of the most famous cities of Asia, Laodicea, was in that same year overthrown by an earthquake and without any relief from us recovered itself by its own resources." (Annals, 14:27).*

Its great wealth was built upon three "B"s: Banking, Bio-medical/Big Pharma and Black Wool.

Banking — The famous Roman statesman, lawyer, scholar and philosopher named Cicero would cash his letters of credit there.

Bio-Medical / Big Pharma — Its doctors were so famous that the names of some appear on the coins of Laodicea. Two of them were called Zeuxis and

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, W. (2004). The Revelation of John (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, Vol. 1, p. 149). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

Alexander Philalethes.<sup>2</sup> The Medical School there was famous producing an eye ointment made from a pulverized rock in the area.<sup>3</sup> The eye ointment was called *tephra Phrygia* — or Phrygian powder and it was exported all over the world.

Black Wool — There was a textile industry built around the glossy, violet-black wool from sheep that grazed around Laodicea.

Jesus used ALL of that cultural context in speaking to this church! Imagine sitting there as these words of Jesus were read to the church that was in this city that was famous for its wealth, its garments, and its eye medicine. There was a stinging irony in the words of Jesus when He said, “You’re **wealthy** — you’re **well-clothed** — you’re **healthy** but in reality you are wretchedly naked, absolutely poor, and totally blind.”

## THE UNIQUENESS OF THIS CHURCH

Laodicea is probably the worst of the seven churches. Ephesus was in danger of ceasing to exist — but Jesus commended them for a number of things. Jesus didn’t have anything good to say about the church in Sardis, but He could at least say that there was a small remnant in that church who remained faithful to Him. But Laodicea is **so** bad that Jesus said they made Him sick!

DON’T MISS THIS — This church in this city did not get this bad overnight.

The church in Laodicea had a close relationship to the churches in Hierapolis and Colossae (see Colossians 2:1; 4:13, 15–16). **Thirty-five years before** Jesus wrote to the church in Laodicea, Paul wrote to the believers in Colossae .

*Colossians 2:1 (ESV)* <sup>1</sup>*For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,*

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<sup>2</sup> Barclay, W. (2004). *The Revelation of John* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, Vol. 1, p. 150). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>3</sup> Beasley-Murray, G. R. (1994). *Revelation*. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., p. 1432). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

**Colossians 4:13; 15-17 (ESV)** <sup>13</sup>For I bear (Epaphras) witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in **Laodicea** and in Hierapolis..... <sup>15</sup>Give my greetings to **the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house**. <sup>16</sup>And when this letter has been read among you, **have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea**. <sup>17</sup>**And say to Archippus, “See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.”**

Thirty-five years before Jesus wrote this letter to the church in Laodicea — Paul’s letter to the Colossians was read to the church in Laodicea. In that letter Paul challenged the believers in these cities concerning the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus. In that letter Paul reminded them that their transgressions were blotted out by the shed blood of Jesus. He reminded them that on the cross Jesus triumphed over principalities and powers and made an open display of them. He reminded them that because of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus they should *set their affections on things above, not things below... that they should put off the old and put on the new*.

**He challenged them to to live an UPWARD life!**

**He challenged them to be driven by the ETERNAL.**

Three and one half decades later they had NO upward life. Three and one half decades later they were living for the here and the now. They thought they’d arrived. *We’ve got our church. We’ve got our people. We are living the Laodicean dream.*

**WHAT THIS CHURCH NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT JESUS**

REMEMBER — the way Jesus identifies Himself speaks directly to the spiritual condition of each church.

**Revelation 3:14–22 (ESV)** <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.**

**the Amen** — *Amen* is the transliteration of the Hebrew word *’āmēn*. It signifies that which is *fixed* and *true* — *unchangeable*.

In Isaiah 65:16, God is called the God of faithfulness; but in the Hebrew he is called the *God of the ’āmēn*. Jesus is saying that HE is the God of the *’āmēn*!

Jesus is “the personification” of truth (truth incarnate). Jesus is the “affirmation of the truth of God.”<sup>4</sup> That means that despite everything they might think about themselves — He is telling them what they truly are. It also means that the promises He makes to them are true beyond all doubt.<sup>5</sup>

**the faithful and true witness** —

**Faithful:** He won’t Dilute the Truth! **True:** He won’t Distort the Truth!

**Handbook on the Revelation to John** — *this phrase may also be rendered as “the one who reveals the truth about God faithfully.”*<sup>6</sup>

What Laodicea could not see about themselves Jesus could see, and so he will give them their real report card.

**QUOTE: Kevin DeYoung** — *They had obvious issues. Jesus could see it, maybe others could see it. They couldn’t see it about themselves.... That’s why we need to have a humble heart prepared to hear the Lord’s rebuke. One of the prayers that the Lord always answers in my life is: “Dear God, show me my sin.”*

**THIS IS SO HUGE** — If Jesus has hard things to say to us, it’s because He loves us. Sometimes the Lord’s mercy is severe — sometimes His grace is hard. If Jesus didn’t love you, he wouldn’t speak to you anymore. The church in Laodicea was utterly indifferent towards Him — but He was not indifferent towards them.

## **WHAT JESUS KNEW ABOUT THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA**

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<sup>4</sup> Barclay, W. (2004). *The Revelation of John* (3rd ed. fully rev. and updated, Vol. 1, p. 150). Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press.

<sup>5</sup> Guzik, D. (2013). *Revelation* (Re 3:14b). Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik.

<sup>6</sup> Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993). *A handbook on the Revelation to John* (p. 78). New York: United Bible Societies.

**Revelation 3:15-16a (ESV) <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**

This is an often misunderstood passage. For sure, God says, *Don't hesitate between two opinions — if YHWH is God worship him, if Baal is God worship him (1 Kings 18:22)*. But I believe there is something else here. Follow me.

Laodicea was located between the mineral rich hot-springs in Hierapolis and the cold spring-waters in Colossae. People would travel distances to get to the hot-springs of Hierapolis because they were useful for healing. But by the time they bubbled over in Hierapolis and flowed down to Laodicea the water was stagnant and lukewarm. By contrast, the water in Colossae was cold, pure, refreshing drinking water. But by the time those waters reached Laodicea they were lukewarm — good for nothing.

**HERE'S THE POINT** — Jesus wasn't saying that He wished they would be virtuous or be wicked. He was saying that He desired them to be spiritually good for something — but they weren't.

**QUESTION** — How did they get to that place? On more than one occasion we have seen how the fallen culture of their city shaped the spiritual condition of these churches.

Here they were — as my friend Britt Merrick put it — *wealthy and self-sufficient; well dressed, successful fashionistas and physicians*. Today we would say that Laodicea was filled with men and women who were highly *accomplished* — brilliant in medical science, brilliant in the world of banking and finance, brilliant in animal husbandry, brilliant in the textile industry, and fashion.

**HERE'S THE DEAL** — The church in the book of Revelation that had it most comfortable and most prosperous was — in the words of *the Amen* and *the faithful and true witness* was the church that had gotten it most wrong.

**METRO** — We're living in Laodicea! If we compare ourselves to the rest of human history; to the rest of the world, we are all 1%ers — some even .1%ers. Just like Laodicea we live in the perfect breeding ground for lukewarmness. By the way



— lukewarmness is defined by its antonym in the command of Jesus in verse 19: **Be zealous!** Lukewarmness is indifference towards the upward life — indifference towards the eternal — indifference towards Jesus. And we all own our private stash of indifference.

In C.S. Lewis' amazing little book, *The Screwtape Letters*, the apprentice demon, Wormwood, is being given his job description:

*"I, the devil, will always see to it that there are bad people. Your job, my dear Wormwood, is to provide me with the people who **do not care.**"*

Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Laodicea it is not a leap at all to find yourself living as though you need nothing from God. Trust me — virtually no one in church culture would ever dream of describing themselves in those terms. Instead, they will say, "I know I'm a sinner saved by grace," "I know I need God." But the reality of that doesn't grip their heart. Their lives say otherwise.

The pandemic came along and pulled back the covers on the extent of lukewarmness in the church. The way Christians reacted to the possibility of having something taken away that they were used to having was telling. It wasn't, "I don't know how we're going to get through this without the Lord" — it was, "You can't take this from me."

**Timothy Keller** — *When Christians come from the poor parts of the world where the church is growing like wildfire, and they come into our American churches, they're usually too polite to say it, but if you press them, here are the things they're going to tell you. They're appalled by our lukewarmness, and they know it's directly linked to how comfortable and safe and brilliant and affluent we are. Here are the things that appall them. First, they're appalled by the fact we hardly pray. Secondly, they're appalled by how much of the money we make we spend on ourselves. Thirdly, they're appalled by the fact we're afraid to even let people at the office know we're Christians, while they're going to jail and being put to death by identifying with Jesus Christ.*

Then He said — *If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial (zeal) of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twenty-first century.*

Writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Charles Spurgeon said essentially the exact same thing

**Charles Spurgeon** — *“The careless worldling (unbeliever) is lulled to sleep by the lukewarm professor, who, in this respect, acts the part of the syren to the sinner, playing sweet music in his ears, and even helping to lure him to the rocks where he will be destroyed. This is a solemn matter, beloved. In this way, great damage is done to the cause of truth; and God’s name and God’s honor are compromised by inconsistent professors.*

*The world is always at peace with a lukewarm church, and such a church is always pleased with itself.”*

**Revelation 3:16-17 (ESV) <sup>15</sup>16** So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

The ESV makes it sound so nice — *spit you out of my mouth*. The word is VOMIT — PUKE — HURL — LAUNCH.

<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.

Check out the contrasts here! **YOU say.... You ARE.**

The contrast between what they think and say about themselves and what they really are is shocking! The contrast between what they see about themselves and what Jesus sees is shocking! The contrast between the wealth and affluence of their city and their own spiritual bankruptcy is shocking!  
You can have everything — and yet have nothing.

**More** is not what we need. Jesus was calling the church in Laodicea — and He is calling this church — to **recognize our deep need** for HIM!

**HIS DIVINELY PRESCRIBED REMEDY FOR THEIR CONDITION**

<sup>18</sup>I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire,

Don't get stuck on the word "buy." For sure Jesus is talking to people who understood the economy of markets. But they need to understand His economy

*Isaiah 55:1 (CSB) <sup>1</sup>"Come, everyone who is thirsty, come to the water; and you without silver, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without silver and without cost!"*

Don't get stuck on the word "buy" — let your eyes get stuck on the words "**from Me**". Remember — in the earthquake they didn't need anything from anybody else. The point of these words of Jesus is not **commerce** — the point is **communion** with Him!

**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.**

Only Jesus can supply what they need! Jesus alone can **enrich** us. Jesus alone can **cover** our sin and shame. Jesus alone can **open** our eyes to see things as they really are.

## **JESUS LOVES THIS CHURCH**

**Donald Grey Barnhouse** — *"Yet upon a church that has sunk so low as Laodicea, the risen Lord still showers His love."*

**<sup>19</sup>Those whom I love,**

*You nauseate me, but I still love you. You make me vomit, but I am absolutely committed to you."* THAT is our Jesus!

The word for **love** is not *agape*, but *phileo*.

Charles Spurgeon — *"The word here used for 'love' is a very choice one; it is one which signifies an intense personal affection."*

**<sup>19</sup>Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline,**

Jesus was saying — *Even though I have to **rebuke** you and **disciplined** you I am still your friend. I love you deeply as My friend. In fact — it's because I love you that I'm reproofing you and chastening you*

**so be zealous and repent.**

The verb **be zealous** (only here in Revelation) is the opposite of lukewarmness (described in 3:16).<sup>7</sup>

In other words — Snap out of your lukewarm indifference! Serve Jesus like you care about Jesus. Serve Jesus like you care about His church. Serve Jesus live like you care about His world. Sing to Jesus like you are gripped by His love and His grace and His truth! Modern church culture thinks that the unbeliever is going to walk into church and be amazed at the musicianship and production and surrender their life to Jesus. They might think that church is cool, but it is men and women singing from hearts filled with zeal for Jesus that causes unbelievers to *fear and put their trust in the Lord (Psalm 40:3).*

**be zealous** is in the present tense indicating a continuing attitude; the following

**repent** is not a fleeting moment of feeling bad — it is a radical, lasting shift in the way you think about your indifference towards Jesus. The tense of the verb **repent** denotes a once-for-all change of mind.<sup>8</sup>

**<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.**

This is used a lot at the close of an evangelistic event. I think it's great! But Jesus is talking to a church here.

**<sup>20</sup>Behold, I stand at the door and knock.**

How utterly amazing is this — Jesus is the one knocking at the door of those who had been indifferent towards Him.

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<sup>7</sup> Bratcher, R. G., & Hatton, H. (1993). A handbook on the Revelation to John (p. 82). New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. (p. 82).

**If anyone hears my voice and opens the door,**

The invitation is not to the church as a whole — it is to each individual in it. The renewal of any church begins when **any ONE** in it is willing to start admitting that they're actually spiritually bankrupt — they're actually naked and blind and in great need of Jesus.

**I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.**

The Greeks had 3 meals in the day: Breakfast, bread dipped in wine. Lunch was like a sack lunch on the go. Jesus was specifically referring to the evening meal. People *lingered* and *sat long* with each other over that meal!

THAT is what Jesus wants. He is saying to them, *It's been a long time since you've invited me over for dinner— since we've sat down and really talked.*

Jesus not only goes to them — and knocks on their door — He waits until they let Him in!

**QUESTIONS** — What keeps you from lingering with Jesus? What keeps Him locked outside your heart? Where and how do you allow Jesus to linger with you?

Check out the LAST thing that He says in the LAST letter to the LAST church!

**<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.**

WHAT AN AMAZING PROMISE!

We will sit with Jesus on His throne for the same reason we will get a white robe — and spiritual riches — and the ability to see as He sees.

We will be given a white robe because Jesus was stripped naked on the cross. We will receive spiritual riches and an eternal inheritance because Jesus was absolutely impoverished. We will no longer have to be blind because He let wicked men blindfold Him and beat Him.

The thing that moves us **from** indifference towards Jesus **to** unstoppable zeal for Jesus is the reality that Jesus was **never** indifferent towards us — Jesus was never lukewarm when it came to saving us. Jesus was ZEALOUS — boiling hot in His love for us.

**“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

There are some questions that the words of Jesus to this church should stir in our hearts.

What shapes your thinking — the world or the Bible?

What communication do you view as most important — the horizontal (with other people) or the vertical (with God)?

What do you need most?