

## THE LUKWARM CHURCH

### *The Message to Laodicea*

#### **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 origin of God’s creation:

<sup>15</sup> “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. <sup>18</sup> Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. <sup>19</sup> I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. <sup>20</sup> Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. <sup>21</sup> To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup> Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

#### **Brief historical context:**

Laodicea had a booming economy. It was planted on the major trade routes and was the banking centre. Goods came from all across the known world making its market place rich, lavish and vibrant. Its textiles were beautiful and were coveted far and wide across the known world. Laodicea had an eye-salve, a medicine (ointment) to treat eye problems — people came from all across the known world to purchase it. Laodicea was a modern town and living there one would most likely have had the money to shop in its lavish market place, and town centres, and to buy what one needed. Laodicea was so well off that in AD17 when an earthquake devastated the area Laodicea refused to take any offer of help from Rome, they didn’t need Rome’s help as they could rebuild the town themselves — so Laodicea was really a good place to live.

However, there was one big problem — there was no water in Laodicea — the town was established to place it at the crossroads of the trade routes, which was an advantage but, the lack of water was a serious handicap. So they brought the town’s water supply from a cool refreshing source miles away using large pipes — but, by the time the water arrived in Laodicea it was tepid (lukewarm) from the scorching sun of Asia Minor, which made it very unpleasant to the taste. Also, the water source was filled with all kinds of minerals giving the water an awful taste. This taste was so bad that when you drank it you just wanted to spit it out of your mouth. The minerals in the water also made it very unpleasant to cook with as it gave off a bad odour when it was boiled or used for cooking. So, Laodicea was stuck with really bad water.

#### **Jesus’ Identity:**

“The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation:” — F.T. Glasson points out that “**the Amen**” is different from our liturgical custom (what we say at the end of our prayers) — the indication is in the words that immediately follow, “**the faithful and true witness**” — probably taken from Isaiah 65:16 where “God of truth” would be literally translated “God of Amen”.

## Message:

“I know your works — be earnest therefore and repent...”

Unlike Laodicea, the neighbouring town ‘Colossae’ had an excellent water source from the mountains’ snow-melt making Colossae’s water cool and refreshing with a wonderful taste. Also the other neighbouring town Hierapolis had wonderful hot springs. So now we can begin to understand what Jesus was talking about when he says to the Church of Laodicea that he wish they were either hot or cold. Jesus is saying I wish you were like the hot healing springs of Hierapolis or I wish you were like the cool refreshing mountain water from Colossae; but frankly, you are like your own water, tepid and disgusting to the taste. In fact, it’s like saying ‘you make me sick like your own water makes you sick’. This is indeed a stern reproof!

What has this church done to receive this kind of reproof from Jesus?

“You said you are wealthy, you have become prosperous and have need of nothing — suggesting they didn’t even need Jesus also — they had plenty of money and material wealth and they had excluded Jesus from their lives. The song ‘I need thee every hour’ was certainly not in the Laodiceans’ hymn book. What the Laodiceans needed was perhaps a better vehicle, a nicer house or a larger office space — they had plenty of money to buy themselves all the things they needed and more, and their affluence had excluded Jesus from their lives. No wonder Jesus felt the way he did! One can understand why the Laodiceans refused help from Rome in AD 17 when an earthquake devastated the area.

The danger of affluence crowding out Jesus is an ancient problem — God warned the Israelites to ‘beware’ lest they forget him when he bring them into the land.

### **Deuteronomy 11:16**

*Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them;*

Do you love God the giver more than you love the gifts? God’s testing of Abraham with his promised son Isaac showed clearly where Abraham’s loyalties laid. This was the test for the Laodiceans — they had come to love the gifts of God more than they love the God who gave them the gifts. Jesus gave a stinging reproof to the Church of Laodicea approach to life. The lesson here is ‘what we really need is Jesus but affluence may just get in the way if we are not careful to guard our hearts’ (Proverbs 4:23).

From Jesus’ perspective the Laodiceans were wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. Jesus tells them to come and buy from him the things they can’t get from affluence and material wealth. In the Laodiceans minds they may have been thinking of the vibrant market place with its rich lavish commodities from all across the known world.

“**Gold refine in the fire**” — Laodicea was the banking centre, they had gold in abundance. The biblical symbolism of the ‘refining fire of gold’ speak to the character and strength of a person developed under pressure, persecution, trials and trouble — you can’t buy ‘refined character’ in the market place.

**“White robes”** — the biblical symbolism of ‘righteousness’ — alluding to the way the Laodicean Christians lived their lives (behaviour towards others) — they can’t buy righteousness in the market place or anywhere else in the world — living godly righteous lives and having access to a righteous God cannot be bought with affluence or material goods.

**“Eye salve”** — Jesus offers them his healing eye balm — to anoint their eyes with Jesus’ eye salve so they could be healed from their blindness and see what their affluence has done to them. Jesus wanted to open their eyes to things they have never seen before, the treasures of his wisdom, seeing the world and their wealth from God’s point of view. Jesus was really saying that the best things in life come from him, and like John, perhaps Jesus wanted them to see him like they have never seen him before.

**“Behold, I stand at the door and knock...if you open to me I will come in and dine with you...”** — dinning in the first century culture symbolises ‘deep intimate fellowship’ that lasted for hours. This is what Jesus was offering — deep intimate fellowship with himself.

**Revelation 3:20**

*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.*

Very often this particular verse is used to invite those who don’t know Jesus for salvation — while this is okay because Jesus’ invitation is not exclusive — however, it must be kept in mind that this text has been written to people who already knew Jesus but, who have pushed him out of their lives because of their wealth and achievements in their lives — they felt they didn’t really need to completely rely upon Jesus, they could do life their way, they could manage and run themselves.

**Reward:**

To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne — living in the presence of Jesus forever celebrating and enjoying his eternal victory.

**Relevance:**

Smyrna was poor in material things but rich in their relationship with God — Laodicea was rich in material things but poor in their relationship with God. Jesus wants to have meaningful fellowship (relationship) with his church, not meaningless (loveless) duty that leads to nowhere.

**Counter cultural reflective points:**

- How do you hear Jesus’ knock over the clutter, the noise and stuff of your life?
- Do you believe that if you have Jesus you have everything that you need? That material stuff is simply a bonus and is not intended to be a distraction from your relationship with Jesus.
- Do you believe that there is nothing in this world that satisfies like Jesus when he is at the centre of your life, church, community, etc.?