

THE CHURCH OF LAODICEA

Revelation 3:14-22

The greatest threat to the spiritual vitality of the Church is not persecution, but prosperity. Prosperity has undermined God's people for millennia. On the eve of entering the Promised Land, God warned the twelve tribes of Israel of prosperity's corrosive effects.

Deuteronomy 6:10–13 (ESV)

¹⁰ *"And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, ¹¹ and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, ¹² then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ¹³ It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear.*

In the same way, Jesus' words to the Laodicean Church challenge us to resist prosperity's deadly influence.

Unique Characteristics of the Ancient City of Laodicea



The traveler from Philadelphia would go forty-five miles southeast to Laodicea on the same major postal road that stretches from Pergamum through Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia to the Mediterranean. The city was also one hundred miles east of Ephesus on the main Roman trade route to eastern Asia Minor. Philadelphia and Laodicea were situated on the only two routes into Phrygia (the eastern province) from the west. This confluence of major trade routes made Laodicea critical for trade and communications in the province. Laodicea was the more important member of a tri-city formation with Hierapolis six miles north and Colosse ten miles east; all three cities were part of Phrygia. It eventually became a banking center and an increasingly wealthy city. Known for its soft, raven-black wool, it outstripped other garment manufacturers in the district and became wealthier still. There was a famous school of medicine at Laodicea, connected with the temple of Men Karou ("god of the valley"), the god of healing. Followers of the teaching of Herophilus believed in compound medicines for complex diseases and developed a compound for curing eye diseases called "Phrygian powder," which brought Laodicea even more fame and money.

There were only two drawbacks to Laodicea. First, like Philadelphia it lay in a region prone to earthquakes. An earthquake in a.d. 60 virtually destroyed the city, but unlike Philadelphia (and Hierapolis), Laodicea wanted no financial aid from Rome. Instead, the wealthy citizens rebuilt their city. Second, Laodicea had no water supply. They had to pipe in water from Denizli, six miles south, via an aqueduct that left the city vulnerable to weather and enemies.¹

The Description of Jesus (3:14)

Revelation 3:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ *"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.*

Jesus frequently emphasized a teaching's importance with the preface, "Truly, truly..." or "Verily, verily..." However, the actual Greek word He used was "Amen, amen..." *Amen* means "to be firm, steady, trustworthy."² Jesus, *the Amen* and *the faithful and true witness*, stands in contrast to the lukewarm Laodiceans, who were neither faithful nor true to Christ and whose witness was virtually nonexistent.

¹ Adapted from: Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 201–202.

² Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000.

Jesus also identified Himself as *the beginning of God's creation* meaning He is the originator of the creation; the One through Whom the Father created all things ((John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:2, 10). Perhaps His point in so identifying Himself is to confront the Laodiceans with their sin of worshipping the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:24-25).

Material Riches Yield Spiritual Ruin (3:15-17)

Revelation 3:15–17 (ESV)

¹⁵ “*I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!* ¹⁶ *So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.* ¹⁷ *For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*

Our inclination is to place our trust in wealth for security and significance. The Church of Laodicea was a wealthy church in a wealthy city. They had more than they needed physically and foolishly concluded they had everything they needed spiritually. This led to spiritual complacency in their own personal lives and a lack of concern for the unsaved in their community.

Unlike the refreshing cold water of Colossae or the soothing hot water of Hieropolis, the Laodiceans were just like their city's tepid, lukewarm water, neither refreshing nor soothing, but nauseating. Jesus was literally preparing to vomit out the Laodicean Church.

Material wealth breeds self-sufficiency; the Laodicean church believed it was rich and prospering and that it needed nothing from Jesus. Their wealth deluded them and blinded them to their true spiritual condition which Jesus described as *wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked*.

The Lord's Remedies for a Church Ruined by Riches (3:18-20)

Buy from me...

Revelation 3:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ *I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, 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.*

In verse 18 Jesus counsels the Laodiceans to buy, that is, to obtain from Him *gold refined by fire, white garments* and *salve*. Refined, purified gold is the most valuable kind of gold. Jesus is inviting the Laodiceans to turn from their far less valuable gold coins to obtain from Him the most valuable kind of gold – spiritual gold. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, truth, power, purpose, hope, eternal life in heaven come from Jesus, not gold coins.

They are counseled to obtain from Jesus *white garments*. In the book of Revelation, white linen represents being clothed in righteousness – the righteousness of Christ and one's righteous deeds done in Christ. Well-dressed church goers can be some of the ugliest people in the world because of what they say and how they treat people. The most beautiful people are not those dressed in nice clothes, but those who clothe themselves with kindness and compassion towards others. Jesus wants to clothe us in true beauty – the beauty of His good works.

Finally, they are counseled to buy *salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see*. The Laodiceans had become spiritually blind to their true condition. What they needed most was to have their spiritual eyesight restored by coming back to Jesus' teachings; to let His Word dwell in them richly. The word of God is *living, and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart* (Heb. 4:12).

Those whom I love...

Revelation 3:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ *Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.*

Love pursues what is good and best for the ones loved. Cuddling and disciplining are both expressions of a father's love for his child. In the same way, Jesus assures the Laodicean believers that He loves them, but because He loves them He is reproofing them and will discipline them. He would much rather them repent and come back to Him than have to apply His discipline to them.

Behold, I stand at the door...

Revelation 3:20 (ESV)

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 eat with him, and he with me.*

This verse reveals how bad things were at Laodicea. Jesus is picturing Himself as being on the outside hoping someone will open up and let Him in. In other words, the leadership and congregation were "doing" church, but they were not in fellowship with Jesus. They were *talking about* Jesus but not *walking with* Jesus. They needed to learn again the lesson of abiding which Jesus taught His disciples in John 15:1-17.

John 15:9-11 (ESV)

⁹ *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.* ¹⁰ *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.* ¹¹ *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

The Lord's Reward for Those Who Conquer Wealth's Temptation (3:21)

Revelation 3:21 (ESV)

²¹ *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.*

In this context, the one who conquers is the one who resists the temptation to place our trust in wealth for security and significance. The one who conquers is a believer who worships and serves Jesus and stewards the wealth entrusted to them meet their needs and to supply what is needed for the work of the ministry. Like the two faithful servants, the one who conquers invests the Master's assets so as to bring Him profit (Matthew 25:14-30).

Interestingly, Jesus states that He conquered wealth's temptation perhaps referring to Satan's offer to give Him all the kingdoms of the earth (Matthew 4:8-10). Jesus' rebuttal is applicable to this study:

Matthew 4:10 (ESV)

¹⁰ *Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, " 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.' "*

REFLECTION

- 1. Wealth is not the problem; the problem is our proclivity to assign to wealth a level of value and potentiality worthy only of God.**
- 2. What practical steps must we take to conquer the spiritually deadening affects of our riches?**

- a. Understand we are stewards of our material possessions accountable to the Creator/Owner of the material universe for the way we manage His assets!
- b. Live with an eternal perspective – earth is not the place and now is not the time to lay up treasures on earth. Heaven is the place and now is the time to lay up treasures in heaven.

1 Timothy 6:17-19 (ESV)

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

- c. Attend the upcoming Financial Crown Course beginning January 30th.

- d. Hold fast to the Word of Christ, to its teaching and application so that we do not become spiritually complacent nor indifferent towards the plight of those not yet saved.