

Jesus and His Churches: Laodicea

(Revelation 3:14-22)

I. Introduction

- A. Lloyd Unsell used to tell story on Harold Gibbs (*elder, station owner, character*)
1. Harold owned a boat and liked to take preachers fishing to get them seasick
 - a. One day two preachers got sick on way out; Lloyd was determined not to
 - b. Mind over matter, force of will... until Harold stuck a sandwich in face
 - c. The bologna smell was all it took; Lloyd was chumming with others!
 2. Harold never took me fishing; he tried once, but I'd heard Lloyd's story.
 - a. I would be easy; I get sick in back seat of a car or at smell of a banana
 - b. What makes you sick? Flying? Roller coasters? Political commercials?
 3. "What is it that makes Jesus sick?" Well, it's not boats and choppy water!
 - a. If something really made Jesus sick, we would want to avoid that, right?
 - b. That brings us to the last of letters to the 7 churches of Asia—Laodicea
 - c. We need to listen to this message—Jesus tells us what makes him sick
- B. Laodicea was founded in 3rd century by Antiochus II (*named for wife Laodice*).
1. It became one of most successful, wealthy banking centers in Asia Minor.
 - a. It's best know export was expensive black wool ("*Corinthian leather*")
 - b. It was also known for a special eye salve. (*There will be a test on this!*)
 - c. Its prosperity can be seen in aftermath of devastating earthquake (AD 61)
 - 1) Sardis & Philadelphia was rebuilt by Rome after earthquakes (AD 17)
 - 2) Laodicea refused Rome's financial assistance and rebuilt on its own!
 2. Church was likely founded by Paul's co-worker Epaphras (**Col 4:12-13**)
 - a. Paul treats Laodicea as one of his own works, and he wrote a letter there
 - 1) He told Colossae and Laodicea to exchange their letters (**Col 4:16**)
 - 2) He greets "*Nympha and church in her house*" at Laodicea (**Col 4:15**)
 - b. So the church at Laodicea had a close apostolic association in beginning
 3. But by the time Revelation, the spiritual condition there had deteriorated.
 - a. The churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia had survived great persecution
 - b. But the church of Laodicea could not survive its great prosperity.

II. Jesus and the Church at Laodicea (Reading: [Revelation 3:14-18](#))

- A. The letters to the churches begin with description of the Christ
1. To Laodicea, Jesus is the “*Amen, the faithful and true witness*” ([3:14](#)).
 - a. “*Amen*” in our prayers doesn’t mean “*the end*” but “*so be it.*”
 - 1) It also means “*truly*” “*Verily, verily...*” is really “*Amen, amen...*”
 - 2) “*Amen*” and “*faithful and true*” means that they can believe Him
 - b. In [Isaiah 65:16](#), God is called “*God of faithfulness*” or “*God of truth*”
 - 1) That could be translated literally as “*the God of Amen.*”
 - 2) Jesus is God’s perfect “*Amen*” whose words and promises are true
 2. Jesus stresses his identity as “*faithful and true*” to contrast to Laodicea
 - a. Jesus could not depend on them to be who they were supposed to be
 - b. Understand, things looked good from the outside; Jesus saw deeper
- B. Jesus condemns Laodicea for being lukewarm, neither hot nor cold ([3:15-16](#))
1. The word Jesus uses here for “hot” and “cold” here are words of extremes
 - a. Word for “*hot*” is ζεστός (“zest”) which literally means “*boiling hot*”
 - 1) It is used of Apollos in Acts 18:25, “he spoke with great fervor”
 - 2) Also [Rom 12:11](#), “*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor*”
 - b. And the word cold is “*icy cold*” (used in [Mt 10:42](#) for “*cup of cold water*”)
 2. Jesus calls them lukewarm, tepid, room temperature (from verb “*to warm*”)
 - a. Jesus doesn’t churches that way; he wishes they were hot or cold ([3:13](#))
 - b. But they want things both ways, hot and cold, and that makes Jesus sick
 - c. Literally, “*I am going to vomit you out of my mouth*” (NET, NASB note)
 3. Bruce Metzger suggests we see “*lukewarm*” here in context of persecution.
 - a. Caesar demanded all citizens in the empire worship him as a god.
 - b. That put Christians on the spot between two extremes, God and Caesar
 - 1) Laodicea tried to have it both ways—worship Caesar and Christ.
 - 2) They saw the compromise as brilliant! Jesus saw it as compromise!
 - c. Jesus doesn’t just demand to be worshipped but to be worshipped alone!
 - 1) They had to choose between Christ and other gods and other realities
 - 2) They were lukewarm because they tried to have it both ways

- C. There's a contrast between how Laodicea sees itself and how Jesus sees them
1. What they see, "*I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing*"
 - a. They're so impacted by culture that they judge themselves by culture
 - b. If they were a church today, they'd point to size, building, bank account
 2. Jesus sees this church as "*wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked*" ([v. 17](#))
 - a. What was true of Smyrna is true of Laodicea in reverse ([Rev 2:9](#))
 - b. This is where that trivia on banking, textile, eye salve trivia comes in
 - 1) They need refined gold (*banking*) and white clothes (*black wool*)
 - 2) They need to anoint their eyes so they can see things as they are!

III. Jesus and His Church Today

- A. Turner (*Making Sense of Revelation*) gives a modern example of lukewarm
1. There was a lot of different churches in Alabama where he grew up
 - a. Most were a blend of Bible and what he calls "*Southern way of life.*"
 - b. That way of life included racism and denial of civil rights to Blacks
 2. Then Rosa Parks refused to go to back of bus and faith was in crisis
 - a. We had to decide to follow the gospel of cross that destroys barriers
 - b. Many chose to their "*Southern way of life*" and racism over the cross
 - c. Why? They were lukewarm; they wanted both Christ and the culture
 3. But we say, "*Those were difficult times and you can understand difficulty*"
 - a. People in Laodicea say, "*We lived in hard times; you can understand*"
 - 1) Caesar was pressuring us so much to worship him like everyone else.
 - 2) We faced persecution; compromise was easier. You can understand.
 - b. Jesus says, "*I don't understand, and you'd better understand right now!*"
- B. We have to choose what is true, and then live that truth zestfully (ζεστός)
1. If the statement "*Christ is Lord*" is true, then other things are true as well
 - a. It means our sin separates us from God and must be forgiven by Him
 - b. It means Jesus died on the cross, rose from dead and lives forever
 - c. It means that true reality is spiritual and that material thing don't last
 - d. It means people and personal integrity are worth more than money
 - e. It means that one day we will have to give an account of words/deeds

2. There is an old Aesop Fable of a great battle between the beast and birds
 - a. A bat hung in a tree and watched the battle, refusing to take sides
 - 1) He told the beasts that he was a bird; after all, he had wings
 - 2) He told the birds that he was a beast; after all, he had fur
 - b. Later in the day, a peace treaty was made and there was great celebration
 - 1) He tried to join the birds in their celebration, but he was chase away
 - 2) When he tried to join the beasts, the same thing took place
 - c. **Moral:** He who is nether one thing or the other has no friends at all
3. Book of Revelation makes it clear that there is a spiritual war going on
 - a. Two great armies are marshaled— Dragon’s forces against the Lamb
 - b. The point of the book is to assure believers who will win (**Rev 17:14**)
 - 1) There is no Switzerland in this conflict; there is no neutrality
 - 2) Laodicea tried to be neutral; they tried to have it both ways
 - 3) In order to be victorious, we must be faithful followers of the Lamb

IV. Conclusion

- A. **Irony:** Jesus’ most tender invitation is written to Loadicea. (**3:19-20**).
 1. Christ is at the door and knocks—he doesn’t kick it down. He knocks
 - a. He waits for each of us to open; then he will share table fellowship
 - b. Holman Hunt’s painting—no latch on outside; it must be opened within.
 - c. And this is the image as Jesus gently asks to be let back in at Laodicea
 2. He ends with a warning to self-indulgent, self-confident word (**3:21-22**),
 - a. The promise of the kingdom of God is only for those who will overcome
 - b. We can’t mold and trim our faith to fit our world like Laodicea
 - c. We must overcome—each of the 7 letters end with this call to overcome
- B. Are we trying live exactly like the world while we give lip-service to Christ?
 1. This text assures us that Jesus is on to us! *We can’t have it both ways!*
 2. Elijah’s challenge on Carmel is Jesus’ challenge to us today (**1 Ki 18:21**)
Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”
 3. We can’t have it both ways (“the people said nothing”). What do you say?