

Christ's Letter to the Churches: Laodicea

Don Fortner | Added: Dec 28, 2005 | Category: Theology

And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Revelation 3:14-22

The Lord Jesus Christ ought to be loved ardently, with an all-consuming love. Behold, how He loved us! He ought to be served with an all-consuming zeal. Behold, how zealously He has served us! Yet, there are many who, professing to know Him, professing to trust Him, professing to love Him, are lukewarm, apathetic, indifferent toward Him. And, it must be acknowledged that even those who do truly know, trust, and love Him, because of the weakness of our flesh, because of our own sinfulness and corruption of hearts by nature, struggle incessantly with a horrid tendency toward lukewarmness. Our Lord's letter to the church at Laodicea was written specifically to deal with our horrible tendency toward lukewarmness and indifference toward Him.

Laodicea was a famous city of great wealth in Asia Minor. It was the commercial, financial centre of the region. Laodicea was the home of millionaires. It had three marble theatres, a great stadium, and a huge

gymnasium equipped with baths. There was a famous school of medicine at Laodicea, which, among other things, claimed to have produced a remedy for weak eyes. The city was also well known for its hot springs, which emitted lukewarm water continually.

The people of Laodicea were rich. They were the envy of the world; and they knew it. They were very proud of themselves. Really, they were unbearable snobs! This arrogant 'we are it' attitude was also found in the church at Laodicea. Perhaps they thought that their wealth was a sign of God's favour. But, in general, the church at Laodicea had gradually become a lukewarm, apostate, useless assembly of religionists, without life before God. It was in danger of being entirely rejected by Christ.

Apparently, this church was at one time a healthy, strong, spiritually vibrant congregation, a pillar of truth, and a lighthouse in the midst of great darkness. Paul, at least once, wrote a letter to this Laodicean church. He talked about it with warmth, and never mentioned anything amiss concerning it (Colossians 2:1-2; 4:13-16). Since the apostle Paul held this church in such high esteem, it is safe for us to assume that, at least during his ministry, it was a strong, vibrant congregation.

Something went wrong. In time this great church, once on fire for God, degenerated into a sickening state of lukewarmness. It became careless, lax, and indifferent. Perhaps the earlier generation had died out. Perhaps its wealth had seduced this assembly into worldliness. Perhaps its freedom from persecution had produced in the people a sense of carnal ease. Whatever the cause, the church was now in a state that was nauseating to the Son of God. It was neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm.

Nothing can be done with lukewarm people. There is hope for cold, hardened rebels. And it is a great joy to work with men and women whose hearts glow with love and zeal for Christ. But lukewarm religionists are sickening, nauseating, disgusting! Christ Himself cannot stand them. He says, 'because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.' Lukewarmness, apathy and indifference, toward Christ betrays the apostasy of the heart from Christ.

THE CHARGE OF LUKEWARMNESS

In Revelation 3 verses 14-17 the Lord Jesus Christ lays a solemn charge against the church at Laodicea. It is a charge that would most assuredly be followed by judgement if they did not repent. The charge was lukewarmness, carelessness, indifference, and apathy.

'And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and

increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.'

Let us be warned. Lukewarmness is gradual apostasy, lingering death, and the forerunner of judgement. Stephen Charnock wrote, 'If once we become listless, we shall quickly become lifeless.' Complacency is a spiritual sickness at best. It is usually a sign of spiritual death. May God save us from this plague, which seems to have swept through the church of this age.

This letter, like the other six, was addressed to the angel, the pastor, of the church at Laodicea. It appears that there were some in the church whose hearts were true; but, generally speaking, the whole congregation was insensitive to Christ, the gospel of His grace, and the glory of His name. There was no fire in the pulpit and no warmth in the pew.

This message of stern reproof came from Christ Himself, the righteous Judge. He calls himself 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God.' Our Saviour is 'The Amen'. He is steady, unchangeable, immutable in all things. His purpose will stand. His promises are sure. His word is true (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8; 2 Corinthians 1:20).

Our Lord Jesus is 'The Faithful and True Witness'. He who is our Judge is faithful and true in His judgement. What He says is true; and what He does is just. Because He is both faithful and true Christ's testimony of God to men is to be received and believed; and His testimony to God about men will be received. Those whose names Christ confesses to the Father will be accepted. Those lukewarm, carnal ones who merely profess faith in His name, whom Christ shall deny before His Father, shall be rejected.

The Son of God also calls Himself 'The Beginning of the Creation of God.' That is just another way of saying that He is Himself God. He who is the parent, producer, and first cause of all things is Himself God (John 1:1-3; Hebrews 1:1-3). Jesus Christ, our Saviour, the Son of God is the One who began everything that is, has been, or shall hereafter be. He is the beginning of the old creation. He created all things out of nothing. And He is the head and beginning of the new creation, the church and kingdom of God. Jesus Christ, our Mediator is 'the everlasting Father' (Isaiah 9:6) from whom all things have life. As He describes Himself here, Christ is saying to the Laodiceans, You are dead. You need life. You need a new heart. Look to me. Turn to me. I can make you new creatures.

'The Lord reveals himself here', wrote William Hendriksen, 'as the One whose eyes not only see exactly what is going on in the hearts of these people of Laodicea but whose lips also declare the exact truth of what is seen.'

In verses 15-17 the Son of God draws up a solemn indictment against this church at Laodicea. He says to the church as a whole, to the pastor, to the

elders, to the deacons, to the teachers, and to the people in general, 'Thou art lukewarm.' They had been so secure. They thought they were healthy and strong. But Christ knew their hearts. He said, 'Thou art lukewarm.'

Christ, who is our Life, charges this congregation of professed believers with spiritual death. 'I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot' (v. 15). The Laodiceans were not hypocrites. They were deceived. They were blind men who thought they had perfect vision. They were dead men who thought they were alive. They were lost people who were very sure they were saved.

Lukewarmness, apathy and indifference, regarding the Lord Jesus Christ is the very worst condition a person can be in in this world. If Jesus Christ is real, then He is the unspeakable gift of God. We should earnestly seek Him, lovingly embrace Him, and zealously serve Him. If He is an impostor, then He is the most vile impostor the world has ever known, and we should earnestly oppose Him. If Jesus Christ is worth anything, He is worth everything! 'Why halt ye between two opinions?' If Jesus Christ is God our Saviour, faithful and true, we should devote ourselves to Him totally. If he is not, we should set ourselves against Him totally. Concerning the Son of God and the gospel of His grace there is no room for neutrality! Matthew Henry wrote, 'Christ expects that men should declare themselves in earnest, either for him or against him.' With Joshua, I hope we can, each of us, declare, 'As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.'

Indifference is an intolerable evil. Our Lord says, 'I would thou wert cold or hot.' It is better to be utterly ignorant of the gospel than to be a vain, carnal, indifferent, lukewarm professor of faith. These Laodiceans professed faith in Christ, but had no interest in promoting it. They professed love for Christ, but had no real, heart attachment to him. They professed allegiance to the gospel, but had no zeal for it. They were lukewarm.

This lukewarmness, this indifference and apathy toward the Son of God, is nauseating to Him. 'So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth' (v. 16). He threatens, 'I will spew thee out of my mouth.'

As lukewarm water turns the stomach and induces vomiting, so lukewarm religion turns the stomach of the Son of God and sickens Him. Those are not my words, but His. Lukewarm religion turns His stomach and sickens Him! Men excuse their apathy, calling it moderation, charity, and meekness. But Christ looks upon it as effeminacy. Quite literally, the Lord is saying, 'I am gagging on you. I am about to vomit you out of my mouth.' This is Christ's warning to all compromising fence-straddlers, who try to serve God and mammon. They shall be rejected, completely rejected, and forever rejected!

One great cause of this Laodicean lukewarmness was their foolish pride. 'Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked' (Revelation 3:17).

Their pride deceived their hearts. These men and women had a very high opinion of themselves. Therefore they had a very low opinion of Christ. They flattered themselves with the delusion that all was well, when in fact nothing was well. They were doctrinally sound and morally pure; but they were spiritually dead. They had a great name to uphold, a sound creed to defend, and religious ceremonies to maintain. All they lacked was life!

Look at the high opinion they had of themselves. 'Thou sayest, I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.' Without a doubt, this congregation was materially wealthy, rich and getting richer every day. They had no earthly needs. But riches seldom do any good for churches or for men who seek to serve Christ. The problem was that these rich men and women presumed that they were rich toward God, that their souls were rich in spiritual things.

They knew the way of life. So they presumed that they were in the Way. They had the doctrines of Christ. So they presumed that they had the life of Christ. They had the gifts of the Spirit. So they presumed that they had the grace of the Spirit. They kept the ordinances of God. So they presumed that they had the power of God.

How careful, how careful we must be that we do not deceive our own souls. There are multitudes in hell today who once thought they were heirs of God and joint-heirs with Jesus Christ (Psalm 139:23-24). Be warned, there is nothing more dangerous, more deadly, or more damning to our souls than self-complacency, self-satisfaction, and self-conceit. Complacency, satisfaction with yourself, is your soul's most deadly enemy.

Now, look at the opinion Christ had of these proud, secure Laodiceans. Though they knew it not, Christ knew that they were 'wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked' (Revelation 3:17). They were spiritually poor, not 'poor in spirit', but spiritually poor. Their souls were starving, though they lived in affluence. They were spiritually blind. Yet, they thought they had perfect vision. The light that was in them was darkness. They could not see their own condition. They could not see the things of God (John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 2:14).

They were naked. Their righteousnesses were filthy rags. They had nothing but their rags of self-righteousness to cover them. And those rags were filthy. Not only were they naked before God, their filthy rags of self-righteousness increased their defilement.

Though they were very religious and moral, the Laodiceans were sinners, dead before God in trespasses and sins; and as such they were both

wretched and miserable. They were 'wretched', deserving of the wrath of God, under the just sentence of death, and in danger of hell. And there was nothing they could do to change their condition. They were 'miserable', or pitiable. Who is more to be pitied than a person who imagines he is a true believer and an object of Christ's favour, while in reality he is utterly disgusting and revolting to the Son of God?

Let us not be so foolish as to read this charge of lukewarmness as a mere historical narrative about a church that once existed in Laodicea. This is a message from Christ to you and me. Will you honestly examine yourself? Will I? Let us ask of God that He will show us our true condition before Him. Lukewarmness is indifference, apathy, and complacency regarding the things of God. Lukewarmness is caused by self-satisfaction and carnal security. Lukewarmness will result in reprobation. Apostasy is always followed by reprobation.

God Almighty does reject men and women who reject His counsel (Hosea 4:17). Our Lord does stamp Ichabod upon the doors of churches where once His glory was revealed and known (Jeremiah 7:12-16). Very often, if not always, those whom God has rejected are so far from knowing that judgment has fallen upon them, that they vainly imagine that God is greatly blessing them.

THE COUNSEL OF LOVE

'I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent' (Revelation 3:18-19).

What a tender, compassionate Saviour Christ is! He stoops to counsel and reason with sinful men (Isaiah 1:18). He counsels sinners to buy salvation from Him (Isaiah 55:1-7), though we often cast His counsel behind our backs. There is hope for sinners so long as Christ, the sinners' Friend speaks graciously by the gospel. 'Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts' (Hebrews 3:7-8).

Here is the counsel of love, which the Son of God gives to wretched, miserable, poor, blind, naked sinners, even to proud, self-righteous sinners. Our Lord counsels the poor to buy of Him gold tried in the fire. The exceeding riches of God's grace in Christ are like gold. But, as gold is refined by fire, so the grace of God comes to sinners only through the blood of the crucified Substitute, who endured the fire of God's wrath for us. Grace is gold that was refined in the oven of God's infinite wrath and justice at Calvary. Like gold, the grace of God in Christ makes poor sinners rich before God (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The Son of God counsels naked souls to buy of Him white raiment. This, of

course, refers to His perfect righteousness. It is white because it is pure. It is called raiment because like a garment it warms, beautifies, and adorns us, making us perfect, holy, and blameless before the Lord God Himself (Ezekiel 16:6-14; Song 4:1, 7, 9-11).

The Lord Jesus counsels spiritually blind sinners to anoint their eyes with eye salve that they might see. The eye salve in this text is the gospel of the grace of God. When applied to our hearts by the grace and power of God the Holy Spirit, it illuminates our souls and brings us out of darkness into God's marvellous light. This blessed eye salve gives us 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Only in the gospel of substitutionary redemption can we see the glory of God revealed in saving sinners (Romans 3:24-26). God's glory is His grace and righteousness in Christ (Exodus 33:18 - 34:7). Though this eye salve can only be effectually applied to sinners by the irresistible grace and power of God the Holy Spirit, we must each apply it to ourselves by hearing it (Romans 10:17), believing it (Acts 6:31), and seeking to understand it (Psalm 86:11; 119:26-27).

This is the wise and gracious counsel of the Son of God, the Wonderful Counsellor. If we follow His counsel, He is honour-bound to make it effectual. The Son of God graciously rebukes and chastens the people He loves, tenderly, but effectually, causing them to repent and come to Him (Revelation 3:19; Psalm 65:4; Hosea 2:6-20).

The Lord Jesus Christ will not lose the soul He loves. Every blood bought child shall be brought by His grace to repentance. He may lead them through great difficulties and terrifying troubles to cause them to come to Him, but He will get their attention and fetch them to Himself. If He has to set their barley fields on fire, He will set their barley field on fire. If He has to send a swarm of bees, He will send a swarm of bees. If He has to kill their Uzziahs, He will kill their Uzziahs. But He will make you willing to come to Him (Psalm 107:1-42).

He rebukes by His own gospel. He chastens by the terrors of His law and His providence. He calls to repentance by the almighty, irresistible power of His Spirit. And He inclines their hearts to Him by the chastening rod of His love. The chastening of the Lord, both that which brings us to Christ in the beginning and that which brings us to Him day by day, is proof positive of His eternal love for us (Hebrews 12:5-12).

THE CALL TO LIFE

In Revelation 3 verses 20-22 our Lord tenderly calls the dead to life. 'Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even

as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in His throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches' (Revelation 3:20-22).

Picture Him, if you can, leaning, as it were, upon the door of this church, a door that had been bolted against Him by complacency and self-sufficiency. But, thanks be unto God, He is not willing to be turned away! He knocks by the word of the gospel. He speaks by the voice of His Spirit. He calls to all who hear His voice, saying, 'Open the door.' If we are His, He will not take 'no' for an answer. Instead, He puts His hand of grace into our hearts, opening the bolted door, and causes our hearts to burn with love for Him. Thus, He effectually draws us with cords of love and causes us to run after Him (Song 5:2-6).

Yes, our Lord sovereignly opens the door and lets Himself into the hearts of His people. Yet, He only comes in where He is wanted. He opens the door in regeneration and in the reviving of our languishing souls, pouring in His grace. We open the door in conversion, earnestly desiring and seeking Him. We must not confuse the two (John 3:3-8; Acts 16:14; John 1:11-13).

If we will open our hearts to and receive the Lord Jesus Christ, He will graciously come in to abide with us forever (v.20; John 14:23). I fully realize that dead men have no ability in them-selves to do anything. Yet, I know that if any will awake and rise from the dead, Christ will give them light (Ephesians 5:14). If any do rise up from their tomb of death and come to Christ, the fact that they do so is evidence that He awakened them and raised them from the dead. If any open to Him and receive Him into their heart by faith, it is because He has already entered their heart in life-giving power. Yet, we must open to Him. Otherwise, we will forever perish without Him. Let us ever open our hearts to the Son of God!

That fellowship and communion which begins on earth in conversion will continue in heaven in everlasting glorification (v. 21). All who overcome the terrible temptations and natural tendencies of the heart to lukewarmness, worldly indifference, and proud complacency, will sit with Christ in His throne forever. And this is the victory by which we overcome the world — faith in Christ (1 John 5:4). 'He that hat an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches' (v. 22).

If the Son of God has spoken to you by His Spirit, open to Him, believe on Him, come to Him. He will save you. Indeed, if you believe on Him, He has saved you by His grace. If you are a believer, but one who has become somewhat indifferent to Christ, flee away to Him now, cast yourself down at His feet, open to Him. He will come in again unto you. He will forgive you.

Child of God, fear carnal presumption like you would fear the most deadly plague. The thought of lukewarmness and indifference terrifies me. Yet, it is ever with me. Only Christ can keep me in life and grace. Let us ever beware of our danger and hold fast to our dear Saviour, trusting His grace alone to sustain us, preserve us, and bring us to glory (Jude 24-25).

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