

The Church of the Closed Door

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Reading

Rev 3:14-22 *"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. 15 I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! 16 So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. 17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and ointment to put on your eyes, so you can see. 19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. 21 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. 22 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." "*

1. Introduction

Laodicea was the second of the seven churches of Asia to receive no commendation from the Lord. Such a state requires us to look very carefully at this church. Can it teach something to us today? We shall see as we move through this final letter of the seven that, unlike last week's message about the church of the open door, we are going to look at the church of the closed door.

a. Key phrase

Rev 3:19,20 *Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*

b. History

Laodicea is situated on the long spur of a hill between the narrow valleys of the small rivers Asopus and Caprus, which discharge their waters into the Lycus. The town was originally called Diospolis, "City of Zeus", and afterwards Rhoas and Laodicea, the building of which is ascribed to Antiochus II, Theos, in 261-253 BC, in honour of his wife Laodice. It was probably founded on the site of an older town. It was approximately 17 km west of Colossae, and 10 km south of Hierapolis. It was approximately 160 km east of Ephesus and, according to Strabo, it was on a major road in Phrygia.

At first Laodicea was not a place of much importance, but it soon acquired a high degree of prosperity. In 220 BC, Achaeus was its king. In 188 BC, the city had passed to the Kingdom of Pergamon, and after 133 BC, it fell under Roman control. It suffered greatly during the Mithridatic Wars, but quickly recovered under the dominion of Rome and towards the end of the Roman Republic and under the first emperors, Laodicea, benefiting from its advantageous position on a trade route, became one of the most important and flourishing commercial cities of Asia Minor.

The city had a profitable business from the production of wool cloth. It had a widely known medical school and produced an eye ointment. It got its water from hot springs almost 6 miles away and by the time it got to Laodicea, it would have been lukewarm. It was also a centre for banking. The church lived within this affluent society and the attitudes of its citizens rubbed off onto the church.

The place often suffered from earthquakes, especially from the great shock in the reign of Nero (60 AD), in which it was completely destroyed. But the inhabitants declined imperial assistance to rebuild the city and restored it from their own means. The wealth of its inhabitants created among them a taste for the arts of the Greeks, as is manifest from its ruins. It was advanced in science and literature as attested by the names of the sceptics Antiochus and Theiodas, the successors of Aenesidemus and by the existence of a great medical school. Its wealthy citizens embellished Laodicea with beautiful monuments. One of the chief of them, Polemon, became King of Armenian Pontus and of the coast round Trebizond. The city minted its own coins, the inscriptions of which show evidence of the worship of Zeus, Æsculapius, Apollo and the emperors.

It received from Rome the title of free city. During the Roman period Laodicea was the chief city of a Roman conventus, which comprised twenty-four cities besides itself. Cicero records holding assizes there ca. 50 BC.

It was probably owing to its large Jewish community, that at a very early period it became one of the chief seats of Christianity, and the See of a bishop. Laodicea receives passing mention in the epistle to the Colossians and is one of the seven churches of Asia mentioned in the Book of Revelation. The Laodicean Church had probably been founded by the Colossian Epaphras, who shared the care of it with Nymphas, in whose house the faithful used to assemble.

Paul asks the Colossians to communicate to the Church of Laodicea the letter which he sends to them (Col 4:16), and to read publicly that which should come to them from Laodicea, that is, no doubt, a letter which he had written, or was to write, to the Laodiceans. Some of the Greek manuscripts end the First Epistle to Timothy with these words: "*Written at Laodicea, metropolis of Phrygia Pacatiana*".

A comment made earlier is probably key to this passage in Revelation, "*The church lived within this affluent society and the attitudes of its citizens rubbed off onto the church.*"

2. The Passage

a. Verse 14

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

Here our Lord Jesus styles himself, "*The Amen;*" steady and unchangeable in everything. If faith is worth anything, it is worth everything. Christ expects Christians to be committed to their walk with Him.

"Less than full commitment to Him and His teachings is no commitment at all." ... think about this statement.

Jesus Christ is the Amen for in him is the certainty of the fulfilment of God's promises (see 2 Cor 1:20).

b. Verses 15, 16

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm - neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

Jesus walks among the churches and sees all our deeds.

In this verse, He says He is literally about to vomit, not 'spit', them out of his mouth. This shows his revulsion of these lukewarm Christians. The remedy is shown in verse 18 in which he counsels them to buy gold, white clothes and ointment. But, we will discuss this is a moment.

An important question from this passage is, “*Why does He prefer ‘hot’ or ‘cold’ and not just ‘hot’?*”

To be ‘hot’ is clear enough. People on fire for the Gospel are powerful and effective in taking the Gospel message to their community.

However, why would Jesus prefer the people here to be ‘cold’, instead of at least lukewarm? After all, ‘cold’ is a state, where there is no profession or evidence of real faith or love for the Lord.

Well, such a state of open and professed coldness or indifference is more honest. There is no disguise, no concealment, and no pretence. We know:

- Where one in this state “*may be found,*” i.e. ‘lost’
- With whom we are dealing
- What to expect

Sad as this state is, it is at least honest. This is better than living in insincerity and hypocrisy. People who play at Christianity say they do things for Jesus, but nothing happens ... it stays that - just words.

A person who is openly opposed to something, who takes a stand and is earnest in his direction, even though it is wrong, leaves hope for salvation. One example is that of Paul. Who could have thought that he would be converted and saved, even when breathing out threats against the early church?

The most hopeless of all people, concerning salvation, are those who are members of the church, but have no true faith. They have made a profession of salvation, but have no evidence of personal fruit and they are content to live as Christians in name only.

c. Verse 17

You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

Their society’s material wealth had blinded them to their true spiritual bankruptcy. The world had invaded this church. It is noted that Laodicea prided itself on three things:

- financial wealth
- an extensive textile industry
- a popular eye ointment which was exported around the then known world

The church thought it was rich in her own eyes, but in the eyes of Christ, it was poor. Compare the Laodiceans with the church in Smyrna who were afflicted and poor but in the Lord's eyes were rich.

Laodiceans' attitude was similar to that of the Pharisees who thought that they were healthy, but were in fact sick (Mat 9:10-13). They thought that they could see, but were blind (John 9:40-41, Mat 15:14). While they were not Pharisees, their condition was similar, which is why the Lord rebuked them. Their condition was dangerous because they did not realise it.

d. Verse 18

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and ointment to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Christ's counsel to them is in three parts - to buy:

- gold so that they become rich instead of being weak, pitiful and poor
- white clothes to cover their nakedness
- ointment for their blind eyes so that they can see

1. “I counsel you to buy from me *gold refined in the fire*”

This is gospel-buying without concern for the cost (Isa 55:1, Rev 21:6), priceless true riches, i.e. salvation that requires our total commitment to Jesus.

In 22:6, God offers freely to the thirsty to drink from the spring of the water of life, in 22:17 the invitation to the thirsty is given to the church to take the free gift of the water of life. The Laodiceans were relying on their own riches without faith in Christ. The gold represents faith in Christ (see 1 Pet 1:7), rather than trusting in their own wealth that perishes. They can only get this gold from Christ. They cannot take their wealth with them after death, but their labour of faith follows them (14:13).

2. “*white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness*”

Originally Adam and Eve were naked but felt no shame (Gen 2:25), but then after they sinned they were ashamed of their nakedness and sewed fig leaves to cover their nakedness (Gen 3:7). In 16:15 at the second coming Christ calls blessed is “*he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.*” In 3:4,5 **those in Sardis** who have not soiled their clothes will walk with Christ dressed in white because they are worthy. Those in Laodicea did not even have any clothes, they were naked, and they have to come to Christ to get clothes to cover their sins – i.e. the righteousness of Jesus.

3. “*and ointment to put on your eyes, so you can see.*”

They did not realise the need for their spiritual eyes to be opened, so that they could see their condition. Laodicea was famous for its eye ointment. Their

great resource would not serve them now. Once again, they can only buy this from Christ.

e. Verse 19

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent

One of the most tender lines in Revelation speaks of His love that cuts through everything. “*Those whom I love...*” this is shown elsewhere, viz. “*the Lord disciplines those he loves, who are his children*”, Prov 3:12, Heb 12:5-8. Note that despite their pathetic condition they had not ceased to be part of the church of Jesus Christ, the same applied to the other churches. The Greek word for love used here is *phileo* (a personal love), in all the other references ‘to love’ ‘*agapao*’ is used (1:5, 2:4, 2:19, 3:9, 12:11, 20:9) the only exception being 22:15.

In all things, repentance creates the environment for open doors – see this in the letter to Philadelphia.

f. Verse 20

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

We see, here, the comparison of what is said to a church without fault - Philadelphia and to one without any word of commendation – in this case Laodicea.

Philadelphia was told that an open door had been set before them, which NO ONE could shut. It is a reward, a gift from the One who died for them. Laodicea was told that the One who died for them is stuck outside a CLOSED DOOR and is asking those who have shut Him out to open it. There are many lessons that could be learned from this. Perhaps the most poignant is that a church in rebellion puts Jesus outside, whereas a church in obedience has the door open wide both from Him and to Him.

In this verse, the tense indicates a continual knocking. The ‘anyone’ indicates a universal but individual appeal to the Believer. An individual needs to hear Christ knocking, meaning hearing His voice, and then He opens the door of his heart to let Christ come in. The meal indicates fellowship with Christ (John 14:23) and anticipates the heavenly banquet later, the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9). Jesus said that whoever hears his voice and believes God has eternal life and will not be condemned, he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24). He who belongs to God hears what God says (John 8:47).

So, even for a church as ‘far gone’ as Laodicea, there is still grace made available for repentance and a return to Jesus.

g. Verse 21

To him who overcomes. I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne

This verse emphasises one of the key points in Revelation, Jesus overcame as the Lamb by being obedient even to death on a cross and he gives himself as the prime example of one who overcame.

Peter points to Christ as our example of one who suffered unjustly even to die on the cross (1 Pet 2:13-25, 3:9 ff.), but who has now gone into “*heaven and is at God's right hand--with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him*” (1 Pet 3:22). Those who suffer with him will reign with him (5:10, 20:4-6, 22:5).

Laodicea was poor, sitting in squalor, but boasting of fine riches. Those who, by humbling themselves, would overcome this pride, will sit at table now with the Lord, and then shall sit with Him, forever, in the glory on His throne.

h. Verse 22

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

Note the familiar formula: “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,*” we all need to heed what is being said here.

3. Conclusion

Laodicea had fallen far, yet the hand of Jesus was reaching out to it. They had shut a door to Jesus, but He is calling those who shut their doors against Him, to open them.

He is knocking and knocking, but the time of knocking will eventually end, either through death or through His second coming. While there is yet time, open the door to Him and let Him into your life, then through you into the life of the church.