

Churches of Revelation: Laodicea
Revelation 3:14-22
ABC 11/7/21

Doors are interesting, & I don't just mean their design (there are some beautiful ones) but their function. They can be opened to let someone either in or out or shut to keep someone from getting in or out. We see these uses for doors in the last 2 letters of Jesus to the churches of Rev 2-3. Last week, in Philadelphia, Jesus had set an open door before them. It signified an entrance into Christ's kingdom &/or a door of opportunity for ministry. It was a door no one could shut (Rev 3:8). Today, in the case of Laodicea, the church had closed the door of their fellowship, in some sense, to keep Christ out (20). It was a door the church needed to reopen. Jesus' letter to the church in Philadelphia contained no criticism. His letter to the church in Laodicea contains no praise. Laodicea was a church that was self-satisfied & complacent & wasn't even aware of its condition. **14-22**

1. The City (14) The same Roman road that went south from Pergamum through Philadelphia passed through Laodicea 45 miles later. Laodicea was 100 miles east of Ephesus, near the eastern border of the Roman province of Asia, sitting on a plateau in the Lycus Valley some 2 miles south of the river. It was in perfect position to become a wealthy city due to the intersection of trade routes from the east. It was also politically important as the primary member of a 3-part confederation with Hierapolis & Colossae. Loyal to Rome, Laodicea received many favors & became known for its trade & banking. It had 2 primary problems, it was earthquake prone, like Philadelphia & Sardis, & it had no water supply.¹ The city had been founded around the middle of the 3rd century BC by Antiochus II & had been settled with Syrians & Jews from Babylon.² Antiochus had named the city after his wife, Laodice. A number of features of the city bring clarity to Jesus' words to this church. For one thing, Laodicea was located near an area of hot springs, though it didn't have a good water supply itself. Water had to be brought through a 6-mile-long system of aqueduct & pipes, which meant the water was lukewarm by the time it got to Laodicea. Laodicea was also widely known for its medical school which came up with an eye ointment, Phrygian powder. They

¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: vs by vs*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries, p 89

² Josephus reports 2,000 Jewish families were brought from Mesopotamia, *Antiquities*, 12.3.4

were famous for sheep that produced a soft, black wool which was woven into highly prized black cloth.³ Above all, Laodicea was famous for its wealth. Laodicea had received help from Rome to rebuild their city after the earthquake of 17 AD, which had also destroyed Sardis & Philadelphia. But 40+ years later, Laodicea had become so self-sufficient it declined Rome's help when it was destroyed by the earthquake of 61 AD.⁴

2. The Church (14) The church in Laodicea, along with the churches in Hierapolis & Colossae, must have been founded during Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:10), though not by Paul himself. The church was possibly planted by his colleague Epaphras, who is commended in Col 4 (12–13) for his hard work among the Christians of these cities. Paul considered Laodicea to be part of his mission field (Col 2:1) & asked the Colossians to convey greetings to the believers there, among whom were **Nympha & the church that is in her house** (Col 4:15). He says he wrote a letter to this church (Col 4:16), but it has been lost, unless it was a copy of the letter to the Ephesians or Philemon, as some think. By the time John wrote Rev, the spiritual condition of the church in Laodicea had deteriorated. The Christians were living like those around them. They had the same proud attitude of their city & thought their wealth was proof of God's favor toward them. Worst of all, they had no awareness of their sin. They didn't think they needed to repent because they were doing just fine. What Jesus tells the Christians in Laodicea is that He's disgusted with them. They make him sick & He's ready to spit them out.

3. The Correspondent Jesus' credentials earn Him the right to read the riot act to this church. He lists 3 of His characteristics which establish Him as truth incarnate. He critiques this church & insists His evaluation is correct, because He is **the Amen, the faithful & true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God** (14). Jesus is the one who always told *the truth, the whole truth, & nothing but the truth*, however painful it may be to hear.

A. The Amen Amen is a common word that means *truly* or *so be it* & is regularly used to express agreement. It occurs throughout the Bible but only used as a name twice, here & in Isaiah 65:16,

³ Strabo, 12.578

⁴ *The Annals of Tacitus*, trans. Alfred John Church & William Jackson Brodribb, 14.27

which says, **he who is blessed in the earth will be blessed by the God of truth; & he who swears in the earth Will swear by the God of truth.** The God of truth is literally *the God of Amen*. It's God who confirms or verifies what is valid & true. Jesus now claims He's the One who authenticates divine truths, has binding authority, & can be trusted to keep His word. Paul uses a somewhat similar usage of **amen** in 2 Cor 1:20, when he writes, **For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes; therefore also through Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us.** Christ as the **amen** becomes the verification & authentication of truth. He is the last word on truth because He is truth (Jn 14:6).

B. The Faithful & True Witness The **amen** is defined in the 2nd phrase, which clarifies by stating He is **the faithful & true Witness**. **Faithful** refers to Jesus' reliability as a witness of God's message & **true** was added to clarify for the non-Hebrew speaking audience the meaning of **amen**. Jesus is **true** in that His witness is inerrant & He is **faithful** because His words are infallibly trustworthy.

C. The Beginning of the Creation of God stresses Jesus's role as the source of & Ruler over all created things, including His church. It doesn't mean He was the 1st thing created but that He's the source or origin of all things. **Beginning** indicates preeminence & source or origin. This thought is linked with the **Amen** in Isaiah, where **the God of truth** is followed in the next vs by, **I create new heavens & a new earth** (Is 65:16–17). Also, in Colossians, Jesus is described as **the firstborn of all creation**. **For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens & on earth, visible & invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him & for Him** (1:15–16). Paul uses the same word, **beginning**, when he says **Jesus is also head of the body, the church; & He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have 1st place in everything** (Col 1:18).⁵ Jesus is the **beginning** & source of God's creation (Jn 1:3; Heb 1:2). He's the source of truth by virtue of being the Creator. The point is that, for all their wealth & power, the Laodiceans aren't in control. Jesus alone controls all creation & that includes the wealth of & church in Laodicea.⁶

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons from the Apocalypse*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, p 142

⁶ Osborne, pp 90–91

4. The Condemnation (15-17) We need to look carefully at Jesus's evaluation of the church in Laodicea & ask, *What is it that makes Him want to spit them out?* It isn't what we might expect. As with Sardis, the normally positive formula, **I know your deeds**, seems to be filled here with irony. It says in effect, *This is the best I can say about you.* Jesus wasn't disgusted with them because of some false teaching or that they'd fallen into idolatry or compromised with the pagan culture around them or that they'd left their 1st love, although all of that may have happened. What made Him sick of this church was that the people in the church were **lukewarm**, self-satisfied, & oblivious to their condition.⁷

A. Lukewarm 15-16

The key to understanding this is realizing the metaphor comes from the region's water supply. 6 miles to the north of Laodicea was Hierapolis, famous for the healing properties of its hot mineral springs. 10 miles to the east lay Colossae, well known for its cold, pure drinking water. Laodicea had neither. The city had to pipe water in & when it arrived it was lukewarm & so mineral-laden it was nauseating. This church was neither hot in the sense of being therapeutically healing for the spiritually sick nor cool & refreshing for the spiritually weary.⁸ It was half-hearted, ineffective, & distasteful to their Lord. They were being condemned for their barrenness of their deeds which neither restored nor refreshed in a spiritual sense. When Jesus says, **I will spit you out of My mouth**, He's saying, *You make me vomit.* The basis for this assessment was their barren works; they were living for earthly pleasure & status, enjoying their riches, & doing nothing for Christ. He's saying, *I wish you were spiritually healing like the hot springs of Hierapolis. I wish you were spiritually refreshing like the cold pure water of Colossae. But you're neither; you're totally ineffective, devoid of works & useless to God, & you make me sick.* Unfortunately, this is still true of many churches today. It isn't the brilliance of the building, the bigness of the budget, or the number of noses that matters to God. It's the quality of worship, the effectiveness of the church's witness, & the conduct & holiness of its members. These are the things in a church that pleases God.⁹ This church, like its

⁷ Boice, p 143

⁸ Richard Mayhue, *What Would Jesus Say About Your Church?*, p 125

⁹ Osborne, p 91

city, was wealthy. But the problem wasn't in the wealth but in the self-satisfaction it brought. Like so many in our culture, they'd become self-obsessed & complacent. Jesus words are telling: **you say, "I am rich, & have become wealthy, & have need of nothing"** (17). The city had no apparent need for help from Rome & its church had no apparent need for help from Jesus. They thought that material wealth equaled spiritual wealth & they were caught up in this. They were providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary nor healing for the spiritually sick. This church was ineffective & thus distasteful to its Lord. How could a body of believers who knew the greatest news that the world has ever heard become indifferent to that gospel? There can be only one explanation: They'd drifted so far from Christ they'd lost the joy of their salvation. How tragic but how true of many churches & professing Christians in our day, as well. They may be Christians, but they have no zeal for Christ or for obeying Him or for sharing His good news.

B. Self-Satisfied The reason they were **lukewarm** is that they were content as they were. They thought they had everything they could possibly want & had achieved everything expected of them. Jesus describes their condition when He says, **17**.

The Christians in Laodicea had prospered materially & thought it was due to their own superiority. *God must be pleased with us, because we're doing so well*, was their thinking.

C. Ignorant of Their True Condition Jesus says they didn't realize they were **wretched & miserable & poor & blind & naked** (17). In all the Bible I don't think there's a more comprehensive & devastating condemnation of an alleged people of God than here. This church had deceived itself about its spiritual condition. Because they'd depended on themselves, they were impoverished, unclothed, & sightless. Christ rejects whatever a church is or does that is prompted by self-righteousness.¹⁰ They thought they were exceedingly blessed because they were rich. But they were actually **wretched**. They thought they were so well off that they should be envied. But Jesus says they were to be pitied. They were like Israel in the OT days, about whom Hosea wrote, **Ephraim said, "Surely I have become rich, I have found wealth for myself; In all my labors they will find in me No iniquity, which would be sin"** (12:8). But the believers in Laodicea were actually **poor** in the

¹⁰ Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation*, vol. 12, Holman New Testament Commentary, p 60

things of God. They thought they were spiritually healthy but were **blind** to their true condition. They thought they were clothed in righteousness & good deeds, but they were spiritually stripped before God. Unlike Smyrna or Philadelphia, the Laodiceans had no external threats from persecution, & unlike Ephesus, Pergamum or Thyatira, they received no internal threats from false teachers. Instead, they'd given in to their own affluent lifestyle & didn't even know it.

5. The Counsel (18-20) What is Jesus going to say to people like this? He's disgusted with them. He's about to vomit them out of His mouth (16). But surprisingly, after He's explained their state & how He sees them, instead of speaking harshly, He offers counsel. Why? Because He loves them (19). For all their failures, this is a church composed of His people, whom He loves & wants to bring to repentance & fellowship. **18**

We're used to thinking of the wrath of God as the basis of judgment, yet God's love is shown to the spiritually back-slidden as well as to the victorious. All passages on judgment against God's people, from the 40 years in the wilderness to the exile to Babylon to discipline in the NT are all redemptive in purpose & meant to wake God's people up spiritually & bring them to repentance. Our righteous God's discipline is a purifying process. Rebuke & discipline build on each other. The **Reprove** means a rebuke that points out a problem & convinces the person to act on it. **Discipline** refers to a punishment that corrects the error & trains the person in the right way to live for God. He reproves & disciplines out of love. Jesus' words are remarkably gentle. These self-satisfied Christians disgust Him, but He still speaks tenderly to them. Jesus is acting as their financial advisor & tells them they've been shopping at the wrong store & they needed to change their buying habits in 3 ways. These areas relate to 3 major sources of Laodicean wealth & status. How were they **to buy** these things? On the material side, they'd bought their fill of things. However, due to their poor spiritual health, they had nothing with which to bargain. That's where God's grace takes over. Their poverty would force them to come to God on His terms because they had nothing to offer in themselves. Future spiritual blessing would only come by the price of repentance, like the tax-collectors who cried out, **God, be merciful to me, the sinner!** (Lk 18:13). The buying here is like that of the invitation in Isaiah 55:1-2 which says,

Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; & you who have no money come, buy & eat. Come, buy wine & milk without money & without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, & your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, & eat what is good, & delight yourself in abundance.

This is true wealth & will never perish like worldly riches do. No one can actually **buy** these things from Jesus. He uses this terminology as a way to carry their thoughts from the material world & wealth to the spiritual world & wealth that can only be received by faith. Remember, these letters are written to the church, to believers in Christ. There could have been unbelievers in their midst, but unbelievers aren't really part of the church. Christ is addressing believers here & says, **those whom I love, I reprove & discipline**. He loves them & promises to **reprove & discipline** them to bring them out of their self-sufficiency & into the sufficiency of Himself. This could require severe testing, pain, & heartache to bring them to a point of personal need & dependency upon Him (Heb 12:5-15).

1st, their banking & commerce were well-known & they thought their accumulated possessions had made them rich. But in reality they were poverty-stricken because all their worldly wealth was nothing but fool's gold. Refined gold is a biblical image for a life that's been purified from sin or a faith that's been strengthened through suffering. Job 23:10 says, **He knows the way I take; When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold**. Malachi uses this image to describe God's work of judgment. He asks,

who can endure the day of His coming? & who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire ... He will sit as a smelter & purifier of silver, & He will purify the sons of Levi & refine them like gold & silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness (3:2-3).

Peter also speaks of the faith of believers being purified in this manner.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, *being* more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise & glory & honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pt 1:6-7).

This is true wealth & will never perish like worldly riches do.

2nd, the city was famous for its clothing industry & had developed a glossy black wool that was prized throughout the Roman world. The principle here is that, contrary to popular wisdom, clothes do not make the person. Looking good isn't the same as being good. You can wear expensive,

designer clothes & yet be shamefully naked to God. The imagery is that of exposure, disgrace, & judgment. When God exposes a person's shame in Scripture, judgment always results (Is 20:1-4; Ezek 16:3; 23:10). **White garments**, on the other hand, indicate honor, & symbolize righteousness (Rev 3:4-5; 6:11), being washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:13-14), & eternal glory with Him (4:4; 19:14). A **white garment** was promised to the faithful in Sardis, because they hadn't **soiled their garments** (3:4). Later in Rev we find this counsel from Jesus Himself: **Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake & keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked & men will not see his shame** (16:15).

Finally, **eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see** is a picture of the healing we need so that our natural spiritual blindness can be cured. Laodicea was famed for its medical center & the **eye salve** it had developed, but the Christians were blind spiritually. Jesus is telling them earthly accomplishments are meaningless if they aren't right with God. The words remind us of the blind man of Jn 9, who received sight when his eyes were anointed by Jesus (1-7). He was only a poor, blind beggar. He had no claim on Jesus at all. But when Jesus restored his sight, the man began to grow in spiritual vision, calling Jesus 1st, **the man** (11), then **a prophet** (17), next, a man **from God** (33), & finally, **Lord**, at which point **he worshiped Him** (38). The key vs is Jn 9:39, where Jesus says, **For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, & that those who see may become blind.** The Laodiceans needed to be anointed with God's **eye salve** so they could see their true spiritual condition, repent, & receive healing from Christ. That's the healing we need, as well, if we're to have the spiritual sight that enables us to repent of our sin & return to Christ.

What would get this church of self-satisfied, blind materialists to come to Jesus for the gold of upright character, the **white garments** of personal righteousness, & the **salve** that would enable them to see? Not Christ's counsel alone. People receive good counsel every day & yet pay no attention to it. If anything would draw them to Christ, it would be understanding what Jesus says, **Those whom I love, I reprove & discipline** (19). This is the only positive part of the whole letter. There could only be one thing worse for the Laodiceans than the rebuke of this letter. That would be no letter at all. This letter is evidence of Jesus' love for the church & His desire for it to be

revived. To **reprove** & **discipline** is to love. To ignore is to hate (Prov 3:12; 13:24). What draws us is Christ's love. But notice this is a love expressed not in indifference, which was the sin of the Laodicean church, but rather in honest rebuke & discipline. It's because Jesus loves us that He prods us to **repent** & be **zealous**. The literal meaning is to be *hot* or *boiling*, the exact thing these **lukewarm** believers were not. They needed to be heated up if they were to please Christ. They needed to be **zealous** in serving Him.

Vs 20 is often used as an evangelistic text. **20**

This isn't a picture of Jesus standing helplessly at the door of the sinner's heart & begging to come in. Conversion isn't like that. Jesus accomplishes conversion by using the proclaiming of His gospel to bring the dead sinner to life & draw the rebel to Himself. But here Jesus is standing outside the door & is knocking. He's knocking at the closed door of the church at Laodicea, those who are His but who've turned their backs on Him & shut Him out of their complacent, self-satisfied, worldly lives. This vs actually deals with church revival. The picture of Christ at the door is one of a visitor knocking at the door of a house, seeking admittance. Jesus has apparently been standing outside for a while, knocking & hoping the church will open their hearts & invite him deeply into their lives. Perhaps this reflects Song of Solomon 5:2, **My beloved was knocking: 'Open to me ... my darling'**. The loving compassion & deep longing is evident. The challenge comes in the demand for personal response, to hear Jesus' voice, open the door, & invite Him in.¹¹ In their blind self-sufficiency this church had, as it were, excommunicated the risen Lord from their congregation. In an act of unbelievable grace, He requests permission to enter & reestablish fellowship. The verb form for knock suggests insistent, repeated knocking. Although He wants the entire congregation to open **the door** to fellowship with Him, the individual is ultimately the one who must decide, as the singular forms indicate: **anyone ... him ... he**.¹² The meal mentioned here was the evening, main meal. Jesus offers this full meal & the fellowship that went with it to the Laodiceans who were suffering from spiritual malnutrition. Jesus, far more than the Laodiceans (or us), longs for the

¹¹ Osborne, p 94

¹² Easley, p 61

fullness of spiritual intimacy in the church. This is an image of calling drifting, worldly believers to sincere repentance & renewal. *Familiar as an evangelistic text for sinners, this vs, in context, actually expresses Christ's feeling of being an outsider from His own church, desiring to be invited back in.*¹³ The result of letting Jesus in is table fellowship. He comes in to the repentant church & dines with them & they with Him in unity, fellowship, & intimacy. Fellowship at a meal was an important part of ancient life, building on the principle that to share a meal is to share a life. The promise here is acceptance, sharing, & blessing, a deep fellowship centered on reconciliation & a new life with God.

We've all probably seen a copy of the painting by Holman Hunt in which Jesus stands by a closed door. Its hinges rusty & there's no handle on the outside of the door. Jesus' hand is poised in the air, uplifted & ready to knock. Many stories have been told about this picture, but here's one that's to the point. A little girl stood with her father looking at the picture very seriously. She finally asked, *Daddy, did He ever get in?*¹⁴ That's a good question. Apparently, Jesus did get into the church in Laodicea, at least for a time. The church seems to have remained until the 4th century AD. In the letter to the church in Thyatira, Christ's appeal was to a remnant (Rev 2:24). In Sardis there were still **a few** who were faithful (3:4). Here the appeal is to **anyone** (20). It's to the individual believer, it's to you. It's a call to fellowship with your Savior. It's a call to repent & confess & be forgiven & renewed to draw upon the glorious Christian life through walking by the Spirit & living in the Word.

6. The Challenge In John's vision in Rev 1, Jesus is seen standing in the midst of the lampstands that represent the 7 churches (13). In the vision that's to come in chpts 4 & 5, He's pictured as a Lamb standing before the Father's throne (5:6). Here He's seen as One who's seated with the Father on His throne & who offers the right to sit with Him to all who overcome. **21**

Jesus challenges the Laodiceans to be victors over the powers of evil & promises a gift. What is it? That the overcomer will **sit down with Me on My throne**, reigning with Christ. We've seen this theme

¹³ Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views; A Parallel Commentary*, p 80

¹⁴ Grant, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, p 75

of reigning with Him before (Mt 19:28; 1 Cor 6:2-3; Rev 2:26-27; 7:14; 19:14; 20:4; 22:5). Notice the phrase, **As I also overcame...** We'll get to that in a minute.

The final exhortation, as in the other churches' letters, is to hear what the Spirit is saying. **22** Will you hear the Spirit today? Don't live a worthless Christian life. Bring healing & refreshment to those around you with the gospel lived out & proclaimed. 7x Christ calls the churches to hear what the Spirit is saying. When churches stop listening to the voice of the Spirit through the Word, they begin to turn away from the truth & no longer function as they should.

There's a story about a village atheist in a small TN town who never went to church. His name was Uncle George. While the Christians were in church, he'd sit in front of the village store & whittle small wood figures & ridicule the church. One day, the church caught fire. There was no fire department in the village, so the people formed a bucket brigade & Uncle George joined them. He was actually at the head of the line throwing water on the flames. The pastor said, *This is the first time I ever saw you at church, George.* George replied, *Yes, but this is the 1st time I ever saw a church on fire.*¹⁵

When we get on fire for Jesus & function as we should, the world will begin to listen to us & some will be saved. PRAY

Communion

Jesus wants us to dine with us & we're encouraged to eat with Him. This illustrates the shared joys of the Christian life, the fellowship we have with our Savior. That He wants to come & eat with us is beyond our understanding. Communion is the outward & visible sign of this inward, continual meal. To eat bread & drink wine is a representation of the spiritual feast with Jesus & on Jesus which we're privileged to enjoy. To sit at His table proclaims publicly our private dining with Him all through the week. Both the inward feast & outward communion are a foretaste of that heavenly banquet, the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:9; Lk 22:30) that we will one day enjoy. But note the basis of this: **as I also overcame & sat down.** The real victory over death, sin, & Satan was accomplished by Christ in His life, death & resurrection. Because of His sinless life & perfect obedience to the Father's plan, even the death of the cross, He overcame sin, Satan, & death & was given the right & authority as the sinless God-man to sit with the Father until He makes His enemies the footstool for His feet (Phil 2:5-11; Heb 1:3, 13). By our union & identification with Him

¹⁵ J Ralph Grant, *Letters to the Seven Churches & Other Sermons*, pp 72-73

in His person & work & through our faithfulness in life as we draw upon His life as the source of ours, we get to share in His reign as a reward for faithful service. This is truly amazing because, whenever we do overcome in the battles of life, it's always through Him. Heb 1:3 tells us that Jesus is the radiance of His glory & the exact representation of His nature, & upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. On the night before His death, Jesus told His disciples, **These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world** (Jn 16:33). Because He is an overcomer, we can be as well.

As we come to the communion table, we remember our overcoming Savior.

The author of Hebrews tells us,

see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, *namely*, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory & honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, & through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings (2:9-10).

Let's remember our overcoming Savior as we remember His death for us as we eat of the bread together.

Hebrews continues,

Therefore, since the children share in flesh & blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, & might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives (2:14-15).

We remember our overcoming Savior as He died for us to break our slavery to sin. To Him be the glory!