

# Letters to the Seven Churches: Laodicea

REVELATION 3:14-22

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**\*\*COVID-19 SPLIT SERVICE\*\***

It is good to see you this morning! I hope you have the elements for the Lord's Supper with you. John will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning. And then, Caleb will be leading us in "Let Me Live Close to Thee" (#391). And remember, we plan on heading outside immediately after that song.

We are starting, this morning, with a summary of God's plan for our salvation. The good news is that God sent his only Son to die on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. And in response, once we believe that message, we turn to God with a change of heart concerning sin, we confess our faith in Jesus as the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism. And once again, we are starting today with two examples. This one comes to us from the Gulf Shores congregation down in Alabama, where Tyler Gilreath preaches. About a week ago, Michael and Alixandria obeyed the gospel! And again, we are sharing this by way of encouragement: What Michael and Alixandria have done, you can do this morning! If you would like to learn more, please give us a call or send a message. The church number is 608-224-0274.

**\*\*PPT\*\*** This morning, we conclude our series of lessons on Jesus' messages to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Back in December, we learned that the book of Revelation is written by the apostle John, from a Roman prison colony on the island of Patmos, most likely in the mid-90's AD. Some have compared Revelation to an email: 1.) First of all, it was somewhat encrypted, written in symbols, and 2.) Secondly, it was sent "cc" to seven congregations (it is an open letter where we have multiple churches reading each other's mail), and now we are reading it today, from their point of view.

Before we wrap up this series, I at least want to mention (very briefly) a weird interpretation of these letters, something I've seen pop up a few times as I've studied this over the past month or two. Some have suggested that these seven congregations represent seven stages or phases of church history. And so, each church supposedly represents a period of church history. Ephesus, then, represents the early church, Smyrna represents the next phase of church history, when Christians were persecuted to the point of death. Pergamum represents the phase of church history when the church compromised with the world, and this continues up through modern times. And if we stretch things a bit, we might get some of this to fit, but we need to remember that this would have done nothing to encourage these early congregations. This would have made no sense whatsoever to the first readers. And that is why we have emphasized that these are real churches in real cities

with real issues facing real struggles. We have no indication from the text itself that these letters represent phases of church history, but I share this just to show that there are some strange theories out there on the book of Revelation. As we learned when we studied Revelation in our Wednesday class several years ago, we need to do the best we can to read the book of Revelation through “first century glasses.” What did this book mean to those who read it for the very first time?

The first message, then, is sent to the church in EPHESUS. Jesus praises them for being accurate with what they teach, he also calls them to repent and return to their first love. They are to do the things they did at the beginning.

The second message is sent to the church in SMYRNA, as the Lord encourages them to ***“be faithful until death,”*** and he would give them the crown of life.

The third message, is sent to the church in PERGAMUM. For the most part, they were faithful, but Jesus had to encourage them not to compromise.

Then, three weeks ago, we looked at the message to the church in THYATIRA. This congregation is growing in good deeds, but they are also corrected for compromising the gospel message.

Two weeks ago, we looked at the message to the church in SARDIS. They had a reputation for being alive, but Jesus accuses them of being dead; so, they are commanded to wake up and repent.

And then, last week, we studied the message to the church in PHILADELPHIA. There’s nothing negative in the message to Philadelphia, but Jesus simply reminds them that he has set before them an ***“open door,”*** and he encourages them to ***“hold fast”*** until he comes.

**I. Today, we move to the last message, and this one is intended for the church in LAODICEA (in Revelation 3:14-22).**

And, by way of review, before we get to the text itself, I just want to give the reminder that we have been using the same basic outline for all of these lessons. We’re looking at the CITY itself and any background information we might have, then we’ll look at how JESUS describes himself, we’ll look at the POSITIVE, then the NEGATIVE, followed by any COMMANDS that are given, and then ending with a CONDITIONAL PROMISE. As you might be able to see, I’ve grayed-out the COMPLIMENT part of today’s outline, though, because, unfortunately, there’s nothing positive in this message. It is all bad.

But we start with the city, and we know from history and archaeology that Laodicea was located at the intersection of several major trade routes, making it incredibly prosperous as a city. Last week, I mentioned that when the Roman empire helped Philadelphia rebuild after a major earthquake, they actually changed their name to honor the emperor. Well, when the earthquake hit Laodicea, and when Rome offered to help, the Laodiceans basically said, “No thanks; we’ll take care of this ourselves.” They were that wealthy. We can hardly imagine a city like New Orleans turning down federal help after something like Katrina, but that’s basically what happens in Laodicea. They are that wealthy and were known as a center of banking and finance.

We also know from history that much of their wealth came from a rather unique glossy black wool produced in the area. They made garments out of that black wool and sold those around the world. They then used their

great wealth to build theaters, and a huge stadium, large public baths, and huge shopping centers. Does that sound familiar at all? Do we know of a place today that has theaters, and pools, and shopping malls? We are living in such a place! In fact, we have luxury all around us that the Laodiceans could only imagine!

And, speaking of Madison, Laodicea was also well-known for a school of medicine in the area, and this particular school was known for dealing with eyes. They produced an eye-salve that's actually referred to by Aristotle. It is referred to as "Phrygian powder," and was mixed with water and then applied to the eyes. Some of the doctors in Laodicea were so famous that their images showed up on coins.

However, Laodicea was also known for its terrible water supply. This was their weakness. The Romans did build an aqueduct into the city, bringing in water from about six miles away. We've found pieces of this aqueduct, but it's heavily calcified, with evidence that it would regularly clog with hardened minerals. As I understand it, these are the only aqueducts we've found with clean-out ports built in – the water in Laodicea was chunky! It was water, but just barely. While we have this picture of the ruins up here, I want us to notice the snow-capped mountains in the distance. I'll be referring to that in just a moment.

As to the church in Laodicea, they are right down the road from Colossae, and we actually have a reference to Laodicea in the book of Colossians, where Paul says (in Colossians 4:16), ***"When this letter is read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea."*** So, these people had received at least two letters from Paul in the early to mid-60's AD – one to them and one to Colossae, both of which they were to share with each other.

So, with this as background, let's look together at the message. It's found in Revelation 3:14-22,

***14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 15 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 16 So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 17 Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, 18 I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19 Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. 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 will dine with him, and he with Me. 21 He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also 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."***

II. **Having already looked at the CITY, we move along now to text itself and to the DESCRIPTION OF JESUS in this message.**

In verse 14, Jesus is, ***"The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God."*** The word ***"AMEN"*** basically means, "So be it." It is a statement of agreement. In the Old Testament, in Isaiah 65:16, Isaiah refers to God as the ***"God of truth,"*** or literally, the ***"God of AMEN."*** He is trustworthy and faithful, and here, Jesus is described as ***"the AMEN."*** He is true, and reliable, and consistent – ***"the same, yesterday, today, and forever"*** (according to Hebrews 13:8).

He is also the ***“faithful and true witness.”*** What Jesus says is dependable and always true. In a world where truth itself seems to change from one day to the next, Jesus is faithful and unchanging. He will never misrepresent or exaggerate.

And then we also learn that Jesus is ***“the Beginning of the creation of God.”*** This doesn’t mean that Jesus was created, but it means that he is the ***“ruler,”*** the ***“source,”*** of God’s creation. In other words, Jesus is qualified to make this assessment...

### III. ...and this would normally lead us to the COMPLIMENT...

...but unfortunately, Jesus has nothing good to say about the church in Laodicea – nothing at all!

### IV. So, as Jesus does, we move right into the CORRECTION, and it is severe.

Of course, as the messenger reads the reports to the other congregations, those in Laodicea might have felt a bit confident: We don’t have any false teachers here, we aren’t worshiping idols, we don’t have a Jezebel in the congregation, and so on. And yet, in verses 15-16, Jesus says, ***“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.”*** To understand what’s going on here, we need to understand the water situation in Laodicea. I mentioned that their water was brought in through a Roman aqueduct. But what I didn’t mention is that Laodicea was located between those ice-cold, crystal-clear mountain streams from those snow-capped mountains we saw in that picture earlier – an awesome source of drinking water (but a bit too far away). And in the other direction was Hierapolis, well-known in the ancient world for their hot springs. So, ice-cold mountain streams in one direction, and hot springs in the other.

On my last trip out to see my sister in Washington State, I made a point of visiting some hot springs – along the way in Idaho, and also in Olympic National Park – by far, the most physically demanding thing I’ve ever done. It was a hike roughly 10 miles each way, almost completely uphill. It took all day, and I started about an hour before sunrise. But it was so worth it, to be able to soak in that warm water after hiking for several hours. The picture on the wall up here is from my favorite one along the way, about an hour down a mountain road in Idaho with no cell phone coverage, and then another hour hike from the car. This one was a spring coming out the side of a cliff into the river. I took a thermometer with me, and this one was 107 degrees, about 3 feet deep. No other humans anywhere. You can see my pack and my walking stick sitting on the rocks there. It was amazing.

And I make this contrast between a crystal-clear mountain stream and these hot springs for a reason: Laodicea had neither! Their water was piped in from miles away, and by the time it got there, it was pretty much disgusting – not hot, not cold, but disgusting! I think we’ve all had bad water from time to time. The water up at our summer camp is terrible. The kids have started referring to it as “blood water.” It tastes like blood, apparently. We were so thankful when they put a filtered water fountain in a few years ago. But without that filter, the water is terrible. That’s the water situation in Laodicea.

Some people have taken Jesus’ words here to suggest that Jesus would rather people be spiritually cold and lifeless than to be lukewarm, that hot is good and cold is bad, but that doesn’t seem to be it. Instead, he’s really pointing out the reality in Laodicea and he’s making a spiritual application: You can drink ice-cold mountain stream water, you can take a relaxing soak in a hot spring, but lukewarm mineral water is disgusting! There’s no real use for it. It’s gross! One reason I love winter in Wisconsin is that our tap water gets really cold. I love letting

it run for a bit before getting a drink. I even get it nice and cold for the dog water! Cold water is better than lukewarm water. We love cold drinks. I remember seeing an ad for Cokes somewhere (it might have been Famous Dave's many years ago), and they referred to their drinks being "tooth-crackin' cold," and I thought, "Yes, that is the way I like it!" Just a few years ago, we got a new fridge, and one thing we really wanted was to have chilled water come through the door. We did our research and pulled the trigger. The new fridge arrived, and later that night we got a drink out of the door, and it was lukewarm. We started digging, and we found the culprit. In case you didn't know, fridge water is usually chilled by having the water hose come through the back of the fridge (inside the fridge part, where it's cold), and they usually have a 10-foot coil back there behind the veggie drawer. Well, halfway through the model year, Frigidaire decided to cut costs, and they whacked the 10-foot coil! This was the reason we bought this fridge, and now our fridge water was lukewarm. I wrote the company, they gave us a 5-year extended warranty to make up for the trouble, and then I went back and added my own 10-foot coil! We now have cold water from the fridge again. A cold drink needs to be truly cold – Kwik Trip slushee, brain-freeze cold! But in the same way, if you're getting a bath or a shower, hot water is also better than lukewarm water. And if we are ordering coffee, we really only have two legitimate temperature choices: Hot or cold! I'm guessing very few ever order their coffee lukewarm. Room temperature coffee is disgusting.

And this seems to be the point Jesus is making with the church in Laodicea: Hot is good, cold is good; however, since they are neither hot nor cold, since they are useless and disgusting, Jesus says (literally) that he will "**vomit**" them out of his mouth. He is the Great Physician. It's bad when the doctor gets sick. And it's really bad when the doctor looks at a patient and gets sick! When the doctor comes in the room and looks at my condition, I certainly don't want her turning around and running out of the room vomiting. And yet, that is what happens here. These people make Jesus hurl. It's not that he would prefer them to be spiritually cold, but he wants them to be useful: Either be like the ice-cold drinking water, or be like the hot springs, but whatever you do, do not be lukewarm. Lukewarm is disgusting.

This, by the way, is probably not one of those verses you'll ever see on a plaque in somebody's living room! This is not the kind of verse you'd ever see cross-stitched on a pillow! It's one of very few "vomit verses" in the Bible, but it does teach a valuable lesson: Lukewarm is not good! Some have referred to being lukewarm as being in the "miserable middle," with just enough Jesus to make them miserable in the world, and just enough of the world to make them miserable in Jesus. They are stuck in the middle. And that is what we see here. They are "**lukewarm.**"

How does this happen to a congregation? It seems that perhaps the wealth in the city had infected the congregation. They got comfortable. And in the absence of threats or persecution, and in the absence of any real challenges from false teachers, they just started coasting. They are indifferent. They may come together for worship, but their minds wander during the supper and the singing, They may come together on the Lord's Day, but there's no contact between members during the week. They are just "there" as a congregation, neither hot nor cold, but useless. This is the Lord's criticism.

#### V. So we move on to verses 17-19, and we come to the COMMAND.

And really, this could almost be part of the COMPLAINT, because in verse 17, Jesus gives a reason for the command. And the reason for what he is about to say is that these people say, "**I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.**" The reason for the command is that they "**do not know that [they] are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.**" Like the emperor with the new clothes, they don't know how bad it is! These people are completely ignorant. They say one thing, but the reality is quite different.

One of the worst parts about some cancers is that they don't show up until it's too late. A person may be walking around thinking everything is fine, when it is not. And perhaps in the same way, these people in Laodicea think they are rich and need nothing, but they have no idea that they are really wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

The command, then, comes in verse 18, as Jesus gives them some advice, ***"I advise you."*** When Jesus gives advice, this is advice we need to pay attention to! Some time back, I saw a meme that said, "If an old dude ever gives you advice while peeling an apple with a pocketknife and eating pieces right off the blade, you should probably listen." Yes, and we should also listen to what Jesus says here, ***"I advise you to buy from Me gold..., white garments..., and eye salve."*** Notice: These three items that need to be purchased directly tie together with what these people were bragging about there in Laodicea. They were self-sufficient, turning down Rome's help to rebuild after the earthquake. In the same way, they think they are spiritually rich, but Jesus says they need to buy gold. They think they have some pretty fancy clothing (with their black wool they were so famous for), but Jesus says they need to buy some white garments. They think they have all of these brilliant doctors and medicines, but Jesus says they need to buy eye salve from him.

But how do we buy these things if we are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked? Obviously, these aren't things they can literally purchase, but the point is: What they really need they can only get from Jesus. We think again of the prophet Isaiah who said in Isaiah 55,

***Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;  
and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.  
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.  
Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live;  
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.***

The point is: What we really need only comes from the Lord, and he is willing to give it to us if we listen, if we obey.

Before we move on from this first part of the command, I would just briefly ask: How do we know whether we fall in this category? How do we know whether we are like the Laodiceans, thinking we don't need anything from God? Obviously, they thought they were not in need, but they were. How do we know whether this applies to us? I read something as I was preparing for today's lesson, suggesting that we look at our prayer lives. It's easy to say, "I don't think of myself as being self-sufficient like the Laodiceans," but what have I been praying for this week? When I go to God in prayer, what do I ask for? It's great to praise God, it's great to be thankful to God, but what are we asking him for? And if we are not asking for God's help with something, that right there might be some clue that we think we are doing okay on our own. If I know I need something, I ask God for it, but if I am not asking, perhaps I think that ***"I have need of nothing,"*** just like they did. We think of the prayer in Matthew 6, ***"Give us this day our daily bread."*** I thank God for my food, but have I asked God to provide food for me today? No. I have food. We have enough food at our house to eat for a month, if needed. We go to Aldi for food. Does this make sense? We thank God for food, but do we ASK him for food? Perhaps, then, applying this to other areas, we need to be asking God for greater courage and greater challenges.

But, back to our text (in verse 19): After Jesus explains what these people need to do, he makes sure they understand something, ***“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.”*** There is nothing good to say about this congregation, they make Jesus feel the need to ***“vomit,”*** but he loves them! To ***“discipline”*** is to “teach.” And that is exactly what’s happening here. We’ve seen the command to ***“repent”*** over and over again in these letters to the seven churches. When something is wrong, Jesus tells them to ***“repent,”*** to have a change of mind, to turn around, to change their behavior. So, as bad as it is, there is still hope for this congregation. And that is amazing!

## VI. As we come to the end (in verses 20-22), we come to the CONDITIONAL PROMISE.

And it’s a shocking picture: The Amen, the faithful and true witness, seems to have been kicked out of his own church, and he’s standing outside the door, knocking, and patiently waiting to be let back in. And what’s amazing is that he’s the one who takes the initiative. We don’t need to beg him to come back to us, but he’s already standing right there outside the door. Even if we make him sick, he’s still there. I don’t know about you, but when I knock on someone’s door and they don’t answer, there’s a point when I give up. There’s a point when I just turn and walk away. If nobody answers after a few knocks, I figure they’re either not home or they don’t want to see me, so I leave. But the Lord is always there.

And the offer is: If anyone hears his voice and opens the door, he will come in and ***“dine”*** with us. This is the evening meal, the kind of meal where the whole family comes together. This isn’t eating a pop tart in the car on the way to work, this isn’t a brown bag lunch in a crowded school cafeteria, but this is dinner. And the key is: We hear his voice, and we open the door. This is the “secret.” This isn’t some new program, this isn’t something complicated, this isn’t a matter of tweaking worship to make it a bit more appealing to the world, but we are talking here about listening to the word of God. We slow down, we refocus, and we listen. He knocks, and we listen.

Back in the mid-1800’s, an English artist, William Holman Hunt, made a painting of this scene. It’s become quite famous through the years, but at the beginning, people thought he made a mistake by forgetting to put a handle on the door. The artist explained, though, that this was intentional, as the door can only be opened from the inside. And you’ll notice that the door is covered with vines. It’s been closed and the Lord has been standing there knocking for quite some time.

For years, I’ve seen this verse applied to unbelievers: Jesus is knocking at the door of your heart, and you need to let him in. But that’s not really what’s going on here, is it? This letter is addressed not to the world, but to a congregation. I preached on this passage once before, back on January 23, 2011. And way back then in the olden days, I used my rudimentary Photoshop skills to take another image of Jesus knocking and putting him on the front porch out here. It’s a different porch now, it’s a different sign, a different time of year, the bushes are bigger, the huge maple tree over on Jade is now gone, but this is what’s going on in Laodicea. This church had shut Jesus out, and now he is patiently knocking, waiting to be let back in. And the church has no idea. They think everything is just fine, but it is not. The next step is up to them. They can open the door, or they can continue on – poor, and naked, and blind.

And if we let him in and overcome, Jesus promises that we will sit with him on his throne.

**Conclusion:**

Over the past seven weeks, we have looked at the good and the bad – the danger of leaving our first love, the challenge of suffering, the danger of false teaching, the danger of sin creeping into the church, the danger of falling asleep, the danger of being lukewarm. But it all boils down to this, ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*** At the end of each message, Jesus speaks to individuals, ***“He who has an ear,”*** that’s all of us, individually. All of us personally have the ability to listen to Jesus and to respond faithfully. But on the other hand, all of these messages are also addressed to the ***“churches.”*** That’s us as a group. So the question is: Are we really listening? Are we listening personally? And are we listening as a congregation? How do we measure up? If you can think of some way we need to come closer to God’s plan as a church, we hope you will reach out to the shepherds. And if we can help in some way personally, if there’s something we need to be praying about, we hope you will get in touch as well.

As we first learned back in December (in Revelation 1:3), Jesus promises a blessing on ***“...the one who reads and [on] those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it.”*** I am thankful for one of our senior saints who requested this series, and I hope the study has been a blessing to you as it has been to me.

As we close, let’s go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

As we think about what we have learned from your word this morning, we pray that we would be honest with ourselves and with you. We pray that you would use us in any way you see fit. You are the potter; we are the clay. Make us who we need to be.

We come to you in the name of your Son, Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: [fourlakeschurch@gmail.com](mailto:fourlakeschurch@gmail.com)