

9

REVELATION 3: 14 – 22

LAODICEA – SELF-CONFIDENT, BUT USELESS!

The letter to the church in Laodicea is the last one of the seven letters that the exalted Christ directed to the churches in Asia that were to receive his book with these visions.

Later on, we will also hear about seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls, with always the last one, number seven, presenting the climax of each cycle.

In a similar way this message to the congregation in Laodicea presents the culmination of this cycle of messages. It sort of sums up, or collates, the seriousness of the dangers in the churches, as well as the responses of Christ and God's promises for the faithful, who overcome these threats and dangers.

It shows Laodicea as a church in deep trouble.

But it shows, at the same time, the great depth of God's love and tender mercy.

The cities where the seven churches were located formed a half circle with Ephesus at the one end, and at the other end, Laodicea. That is again more

to the South East. Laodicea was a bit older than Philadelphia and had been established in the third century before Christ.

It was built in a valley that was used intensively as a natural travelling route from Ephesus, on the coast, to the Anatolian Highlands in eastern Turkey. But this was not the only highway that ran through Laodicea. There were actually three major highways that came together at that point.

Because of this strategic location, Laodicea flourished, and it grew rapidly into an important commercial and financial centre. It was a city of bankers and millionaires and was quite famous in the ancient world for its wealth.

As we read through this letter and hear how the exalted Christ is addressing the church in Laodicea, we find out that he does not have much good to say. It actually sounds remarkably like the situation we came across in the church at Sardis – that was the dead church, remember?

Christ Jesus' analysis, or his diagnosis, of what is going on in this congregation must have been quite shocking and hard to swallow for the good folks in Laodicea. It is hard to believe! They had it so good.

That is why Christ's self-presentation is so relevant for those Christian believers. "Don't dismiss my words," says Christ. "Always remember who I am." And to underline that he knows exactly what he is talking about, when he addresses what is going on in the hearts of these people, he tells them three things about himself.

"I come to you as *the faithful and true witness*," he says. This comes from God's greeting to the churches, as John gave it in Rev. 1:5. In this way Jesus Christ makes clear: "what I say is true and reliable – always. The way I describe the facts is accurate. Even if what I have to say is unpleasant, or perhaps shocking and painful, I will always be *the way, the truth and the life*" (John 14:6).

"That's why I am also called *the Amen*." In the Old Testament God is sometimes called "the Amen", but this is the only time that Christ calls himself "the Amen". It stresses his authority and trustworthiness. Never question my words.

And then: “I am also *the beginning of God’s creation*”. In John 1:3 we read that *through him all things were made and that without him not anything was made that was made*. Jesus Christ was actively involved in the creation of everything.

The apostle Paul confirms this in Colossians 1:16 and 17, and then he calls Christ, in v.18, *the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent*. In other words, Christ was not only the beginning of the old creation – through his resurrection he also became the beginning of the new creation.

Altogether, Christ impresses on the people in Laodicea, and in the church today, how important it is to listen carefully to what he is saying. His words carry more weight than anything else. You can trust him when he analyzes the situation in Laodicea. He is not fooled by just outward appearances. He smells falsehood and deception, so to speak. You cannot pull the wool over his eyes.

And so, we better listen carefully when the glorified Christ qualifies the life of the congregation in Laodicea. That is a pretty dramatic image. He who knows everything comes with a strong judgment of this church. He begins his evaluation by saying, *you are neither cold nor hot... you are lukewarm!*

We all know this expression. This is how we know the church at Laodicea: it is “the lukewarm church”. It is amazing how such a label sticks and becomes so familiar. But what is Christ saying with this image?

The people in Laodicea must have recognized the allusions. They were able to relate to this metaphor. The city was proud of its abundant wealth, but they had a problem with their drinking water. Why was that?

Well, Laodicea was pretty close to two other cities: Hierapolis and Colossae. Now Hierapolis was famous for its hot springs. The water was actually said to have healing qualities. Colossae on the other hand had ample supply of cold water via streams that came from high up in the mountains.

But Laodicea did not have any natural sources of drinking water. Their water had to come from farther away, transported by an aqueduct and pipes. By the time it arrived in the city, the water was lukewarm. You would not want to drink it. It tasted awful.

This shows that you cannot say that this image refers to a scale of personal commitment to God, like ‘cold’ is bad, ‘hot’ is good, and ‘lukewarm’ is in between. Some people explain it this way. You are cold when you do not have faith, when you reject Jesus in unbelief. You are hot when you are full of excitement, full of enthusiasm and on fire for the Lord. And when you are hanging in between, you would be lukewarm.

But then Christ would not have said: *I wish you were either one or the other – cold or hot.* And that is what he says: cold and hot are both good, whereas lukewarm is bad.

Now, how can ‘cold’ be good if it refers to unbelief? You don’t expect Jesus to say, “I prefer you to be an unbeliever who rejects me as his Saviour, rather than a half-hearted believer. That does not make sense!

No, he is talking about the attitude and actions of the church. With this image he urges the church to be either hot or cold, but not lukewarm! Think again of the water.

Cold water is refreshing. It is useful for drinking, for quenching your thirst, especially in a hot climate. Hot water is useful for cleaning, cooking, and bathing. But lukewarm water is good for nothing.

The water in Laodicea may look okay, but when you drink it, you say “yuk”. You spit it out because it is disgusting. It is an image of uselessness. And this is the image that Christ is using for a church that is proud and self-confident but does not have a clue what it really means to be church of Jesus Christ.

“Look at us! We are ‘well-to-do’ and fine Christians here in Laodicea, you know.” But Christ says, “You are useless for my service, for the glory of my name. You are disgusting. You make me nauseous. That’s why I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

Now that is an outrageous way of putting it. But really, Jesus Christ cannot stand the smug self-confident attitude, the uselessness of the spiritual complacency that was so dominant in Laodicea.

And only in Laodicea? What does it mean for you and me; for us here to be lukewarm and become useless for the service of God?

You become lukewarm when we are so focussed on material things or on the attractions of the world, that serving God is restricted to a religious activity on the Sunday. Then you become spiritually complacent and your faith becomes a superficial formality. Although, you may not think so.

You can become lukewarm towards your brothers and sisters in Jesus. You prefer to hang out with the select group of friends you feel comfortable with. Then initially you forget, but after a while you will no longer care for your commitment, your loyalty towards others who also belong to Jesus.

You can become lukewarm towards the church. What the church does has to meet your expectations and has to fit your schedule or has to suit your ideas. And if it does not, well, you might want to say: “forget about the whole business. Who cares?”

Or you try to find something that does meet your expectations or fit your schedule or suit your ideas. And this includes the worship services. O sure, you want to worship on a regular basis. But if for some reason you do not like certain things, or you just do not feel like it, or time and place of worship are inconvenient, it can become easy to stay home or do something else.

Let us talk about these things. Let us not avoid or ignore these questions, but let us challenge each other as we dig into the Bible and our reformed confessions. Let us learn more and more how we can battle spiritual complacency and spiritual uselessness. Let us help each other to avoid a lukewarm attitude toward God, toward the church, or toward each other.

So, what is actually going on in Laodicea that makes Christ say to this congregation: “you are lukewarm – you are disgusting”? What is Jesus’ strong aversion based on? Why does he say these things?

Well, the citizens of Laodicea were rich. And they knew it. They were actually quite proud of it. The wealth they had accumulated made them arrogant and careless. And this self-confident attitude that was characteristic for the city of Laodicea, spilled over in the church. They were an affluent city, and you would find the same attitude among the Christian congregation, too.

This is what Jesus confronts them with. And he really wants to drive it home with this three-fold emphasis on the self-sufficiency they claim. *You say, “I*

am rich; I have prospered, and I need nothing!” Indeed, church-people are boasting in their economic successes, just like anyone else.

The material wealth, the riches they had accumulated, led them to look at themselves with smug self-confidence. Perhaps they saw their abundant prosperity as God’s special blessing, God’s special favour towards them.

And so, there was nothing to worry about. Their sins no longer trouble them. They did not see any need to change, or to look critically at themselves. “No, no. We, here in Laodicea, we made it and we are doing mighty fine, thank you very much.”

Business-wise, financially, and materially they have arrived. They do not have any needs to worry about. Everything is taken care of. Everything is under control.

Does that not sound attractive? You do not have to be a Laodicean millionaire, to like the idea that you have your life under control. We all like that. It can make you pretty self-confident when everything goes according to your plan. Look at me. I can pull this off. I can make this work. And we can be jealous of people that are successful and who do have everything under control. Or so it seems.

But appearances are deceptive. A big success story can impress us. Abundant wealth, lots of money can intimidate us. And yes, we know that it all can be put to good use. But it can also cover up spiritual poverty. That is a real danger. And this is what is happening in the church in Laodicea. Their material and financial self-confidence had led them also to spiritual self-confidence or self-satisfaction.

They were so proud of their wealth. They were so absorbed in it that they did not even realize that they did not experience a living relationship, the living communion with Jesus Christ. They did not even miss it.

But the exalted Christ is going to expose this as self-deception. “You are so self-confident; you are so full of yourself as you brag about all the wealth and possessions you have collected, but you are fooling yourself. You are useless, like lukewarm water that no one wants to drink.”

“Look”, says Jesus Christ, “you say that you are rich and self-sufficient. And that is indeed what it looks like from your earthly viewpoint, from below. But I invite you to have a look at yourself from here, from my viewpoint, from above. From here you look totally different. You are the very opposite of what you think you are. You do not know in how bad of a shape you really are.”

You are wretched and pitiable. You are poor, blind, and naked. You are just full of misery. And again, you do not even realize it. You have no clue. This is so pathetic! Nothing is more pitiable than someone who thinks that he is a fine Christian, and yet, in reality, Christ is disgusted with him and ready to spit him out.

These five words give a terrible picture of the church in Laodicea. The inner condition of this congregation is a mess. It is a spiritual disaster. It is a church that does not really need Jesus. They live without God and without Jesus Christ. They are *poor* – they do not live out of the riches of God’s grace. They are *blind* – they do not see their misery. They are *naked* – they do not have the faith that covers their sin.

It is true, appearances can indeed be deceptive in this world. But also in the church. They can hide the reality. Only when we get the above point-of-view; only when we get the view of him who is the faithful and true witness – only then we will see the truth; only then we will get the true diagnosis of what is really going on. And this diagnosis cuts deep, very deep. With his words, Christ shocks them into reality. But that is needed to get to the remedy.

Indeed, the remedy. Because this is not the end for Laodicea. Christ does not stop after he has exposed the terrible spiritual disaster in that congregation. He does not say: *I spit you out*, but: *I will spit you out*. Or more accurate even: *I am about to spit you out*. He is waiting. He wants to drive out the lukewarm spirit and renew the first love. There is still hope for this church because he loves her. Great is his faithfulness.

“Here is my solution for you,” says Christ. *I counsel you to buy from me.....* Do you hear his tender love in how he says it? It is not: “I command” or “I demand”! No, “I counsel you; I strongly advise you.” Oh, it is urgent enough. But it is the compassion with which he reaches out to his people.

So then, what does he have to help them reverse the downward direction this church is going? He offers three products for sale: gold, white garments, and eye-salve. And these are not just random deals but each one has been selected to fix the problems the congregation is facing. You are poor – I have gold for you. You are naked – I have white clothes for you. You are blind – I have eye-salve for you.

Of course, these products are symbolic. “You thought you were rich with all your wealth? Look at this... my pure gold... the refined gold of my payment for all your sins. This will make you really rich.” The wealth Jesus Christ offers has eternal value.

One of the local products Laodicea was famous for, was its black wool. “But,” says Christ, “forget about the fancy garments in the stores. Look at these white clothes – only these can cover the shameful nakedness of your sin and guilt. Fool yourself no longer, but clothe yourself with my righteousness and purity, the spotless garments that I alone provide. Get dressed for the great wedding banquet that is coming.”

Laodicea was also well-known for its pharmaceutical products. “But,” says Christ, “I have the healing power that really matters. You think there is nothing wrong with your eye-sight. You think that you are perfectly capable to see clearly what matters; to discern between right and wrong, good and bad.

But use my salve to put on your eyes, and you will find out how blind you were. The salve of my love will allow you to see what is wrong. It will open your eyes for the spiritual poverty hidden under your material prosperity. It will expose your sin, but it will also let you see what real holiness is all about”.

“Turn to me,” says Jesus Christ. He came into this world, born in Bethlehem, to provide for you what you need to fix the real problem in your life. These are the real Christmas deals. Turn to him and buy the only remedies that can meet the needs of the church, as well as our individual needs. Turn to him, who was and is *the beginning of God’s creation* and find your eternal spiritual well-being.

But what about this idea of “buying” what Christ is offering here? How does that work? How can we ever buy anything from him, poor, naked, and blind as we are? We have nothing to pay with.

That is correct. But then think, for instance, of what we read in Isaiah 55. Here the LORD unfolds the great perspective of his glorious plan of salvation as it will be accomplished in Jesus Christ. And this begins by saying: *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.*

Yes, you are invited to buy without paying anything, because Jesus Christ himself paid for all of it. God’s gifts are free of charge because they are priceless. God’s salvation is by grace alone, because it is too precious for any of us to pay for.

Just hold out your empty hands and your Father in heaven will fill them.

You can imagine that some of this was quite shocking for the Christians in Laodicea. When Christ rebuked them it really rattled their self-confidence! But he did not say these things to beat them over the head, slap them in the face, or humiliate them. Yes, he rebukes and disciplines, but what drives him is his deep love for them. His love for his church had not become lukewarm.

And so, he does not want to alienate them. He wants to shake them up. They must understand how serious this is, so that they may turn around and renew their fellowship with him. Is it not wonderful how Jesus’ love reaches out to these lukewarm people, with whom he is so disgusted, that he is almost ready to spit them out?

Do we do this? When we get frustrated by lukewarm people in the church, when we see others who become indifferent toward God and the church, do we reach out in tender mercy? Or do we rather distance ourselves? Do we encourage each other to “buy” stuff from Jesus and so to become rich and whole in him?

Always remember that Jesus Christ himself continues to reach out and call out to people, even if they have locked him out. That is your Saviour!

Behold, I stand at the door and knock, he says to the church in Laodicea.

Here is another beautiful image of Jesus' persistent love. He does not give up. "Don't ignore me but listen carefully. I am so close by! I know that you hear me."

Some people like to use these words in v.20 to boost evangelism activities. They suggest that Jesus is knocking on the door of the hearts of unbelievers. They go around and urge people to open the door of their hearts and let Jesus in. "He is standing at the door and he knocks," they say. "He is waiting for you to let him in".

But that is not what it says here. This is not the door of the heart, and it does not talk about unbelievers. Although it is a popular idea, an unbeliever would not be able to open the door of his heart to invite Jesus in. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

No, this is about the door of the church, Christ's own church. And that this door is closed, shows you how serious, how dangerous the situation has become in Laodicea. The congregation seems to have excluded Christ from its fellowship. Here is a Bride who has closed the door for her Bridegroom. Christ knocks persistently, again and again, for he longs to be welcome in his church.

This makes it actually an unsettling and even bizarre picture. The church belongs to Christ. It is his home. She is his Bride. But he is outside! He is standing on the porch. And he asks for permission to enter his own church. Is that not weird?

And yet, Christ does not force his way in. He could have, but he chose not to. With a love-filled heart he keeps calling, knocking, and reaching out. During the last days before his return, his coming is not threatening, but promising. There is still the promise of new fellowship. There is still time for lukewarm, complacent Christians to renew the relationship with their Master.

Think of this. Christ stands at the door of the church, every local church! He is eager to get in. He wants very much to be part of what is going on there. He very much desires to be part of the faith-life of those in the church. Not as a religious idea, not as a far-away power, not as a symbol. No, as a real

person to trust and relate to, a man to have a meal with, a man to enjoy communion with.

Do not lock him out. The church that keeps itself busy with all sorts of things people consider important, but leaves Jesus Christ outside, will become lukewarm. Such a church will eventually be spat out.

You can also do this in your personal faith-life. Do not lock Jesus out. It is not so difficult to do this. Just keep yourself so busy with whatever it is, that you do not have any attention left for him. Hang out with people that do not have much use for Jesus. And before you know it, you have worked him out of your life. It is easy enough. But it is dangerous and potentially life-threatening.

However – he lets you know: *Behold! I stand at the door and knock.* In this life he keeps knocking. And his faithfulness comes with a lovely promise. *If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*

These last few words are not just a superfluous repetition. When you welcome Christ as guest at your table, he will also welcome you as guests at his table.

Sharing a meal is a festive opportunity for intimate fellowship and celebration. And Jesus Christ is looking forward to this fellowship, to celebrating the communion, the relationship between him and us, poor, wretched, and pitiable people, when we listen to his voice and open the door to have him fill our needs.

This table-fellowship with Christ begins here in this life already. It becomes visible when we gather around the Lord's Supper table to share in the body and blood of Christ. In the Holy Supper, Christ comes and feeds us with himself to strengthen our faith.

We may do this in anticipation of the great feast at the end of time. Then this table-fellowship will be completed and perfected at the eternal banquet, *when Christ will drink the wine new with us in the kingdom of his Father* (Mat. 26:29). The wedding feast of the Lamb of God is coming.

And because of this renewed fellowship with Jesus Christ, the end will be glorious and victorious for all those who conquer the dangers that threaten their faith.

The glorified Christ will give you the right to sit on the throne with God.

And he will share his victorious ruling-power and awesome glory with all those that open the door for him. Do not make him wait.

church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.

2. How can a dead church become alive again? Describe the differences between a dead church and a church that is alive. How do you find out?
3. Some interpretations of the Book of Revelation (and other passages in the New Testament that speak about Jesus' return) talk about 'the rapture'. This is the view that Jesus will come to take the true believers up to heaven, before 'the hour of trial', also called 'the great tribulation', after which he will return to judge. What do you think about this idea, and how would this impact our faith life?
4. How can the Book of Revelation help us today to apply, in our lives, passages like Ephesians 6:10-18; Matt. 25:1-13; John 17; Colossians. 1:15-23; 1 Thess. 5:1-11?

Chapter 8 – Revelation 3:7-13

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Philadelphia Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and how you should deal with these.
2. Compare the promise in Revelation 3:9 with what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 11. Some Christians believe that the Jews still have a privileged position as God's Old Testament covenant people, and that there is a special promise of a general conversion of the Jewish people. Discuss.
3. When the church is facing opposition in this world – something we are seeing and hearing more and more – Christian believers need to be reassured and encouraged. What are the ways in which the glorified Christ is doing this here in this passage?
4. How does the letter to the church in Philadelphia encourage us to be actively involved in mission and evangelism?

Chapter 9 – Revelation 3:14-22

1. Are there any aspects of the church-life in Laodicea Christ is pointing at, either negative or positive, that you can also identify in the

church you belong to? If so, discuss what they are and who you should deal with these.

2. What does it mean to be *lukewarm*? And how can we help each other to avoid a lukewarm attitude toward God, toward the church and toward each other?
3. What is the wrong thinking behind the use of Revelation 3:20 to stimulate evangelism activities in the church?
4. In all these seven letters we hear close to the end or right at the end the words *he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*. What is the intention of this phrase, which is apparently important enough to stress this to all the churches?

Chapter 10 – Revelation 4

1. At the end of all seven letters the glorified Christ promises various blessings to *the one who conquers*. What does he mean by that? And what or who are we to conquer? And how are we supposed to do this?
2. John's vision in Revelation 4 is pretty amazing. What does it mean for us and how should it impact us that God is supremely holy? How should the worship in heaven we read about, impact the manner in which we worship this holy God?
3. When the 24 elders represent the church in God's presence (verse 4), what does that tell us about the place and the role of the church in the last days (the time between Jesus' 1st and 2nd coming)? Does the fact that the church is represented by 'elders' teach us anything about the office of 'elder' in the church today?
4. Read Isaiah 6:1-3 and Ezekiel 1:4-28 and compare those descriptions with the description of the four living creatures in Revelation 4:6-8.

Chapter 11 – Revelation 5

1. How do we come to know God in Revelation 4 and 5? And what does 'worship' mean in the light of this chapter?
2. We read here about abundant worship: the 4 creatures, the 24 elders, myriads of angels, and joined by all God's earthly creatures. Is