



LAODICEA

REVELATION 3:14-22

Lesson Focus

Christ calls us to relinquish self-reliance, submitting ourselves to his Lordship and care.

Lesson Outcome

Through this lesson, students should:

1. Understand that in our affluence, we should still seek to remain faithfully dependent on Christ.
2. Encouraged to reflect on how our wealth has made us less reliant on God.
3. Encouraged to repent of their self-reliance.

Catching up on the Story

We've reached Jesus' final letter to the churches. These letters have contained a mixture of praise and admonishment. As is often the case with people and organizations, the churches can do better in their Christian witness. The constant, however, is the cultural forces surrounding these early believers.

The churches are constantly tempted by economic, religious, and political idolatry. These three forms of idolatry are all connected in the first-century world. The area's economy was controlled by trade guilds who worshiped patron gods at meetings that often turned into drunken debauchery. Without participating in the trade guild meetings, putting food on the table would not be easy. Not only were they encouraged to worship the patron god of their trade, but emperor worship was also an important part of civic involvement. Failure to offer the appropriate act of worship could label the person a subversive and thus a danger to the state.

By and large, each church Jesus addresses is tempted to accommodate to the surrounding culture as a way to ensure survival. Some of the churches did better than others. The whole of these seven letters makes it abundantly clear that Jesus wishes that we confess him as Lord above and before anything or anyone else, even if it costs us everything.

Some Context

Laodicea was a wealthy town situated strategically at a critical crossroad.

King Antiochus II founded the city between 261 and 246 BCE and named it after his wife, Laodice (Blount, 80). Laodicea was so wealthy that when an earthquake destroyed it, it refused the offer of imperial money to rebuild. Instead, the city financed its own reconstruction.

Three principal industries generated Laodicean wealth. Because it was located at an important crossroad, it became a center for trade and finances. The city established banks to help meet the financial needs of those who passed through their city. Laodicea was also known for producing dark wool, which was used to make rich textiles. The ground around the city was fertile and conducive to raising sheep. Finally, the town was home to a medical institution. The medical community had devised an eye salve made from "Phrygian powder." The salve was thought to help failing eyesight (Blount, 81).

It was not all sunshine in Laodicea. The city had a significant difficulty; its water wasn't the best. Laodicea had no water supply of its own. Instead, they built an aqueduct six miles long. The origination point of the aqueduct was the hot springs of Hierapolis. By the time the water had traveled six miles to the city, it had cooled off, becoming neither hot nor cold. Additionally, the water of the hot springs had various minerals, which affected its taste. The combination of temperature and minerals in the water made it rather distasteful, causing the drinker to spit it out.

I know your works...

For the final time, Jesus reiterates his knowledge of the churches and what they do, both good and bad. Unfortunately for the Laodiceans, Jesus only has words of rebuke. The first charge against the Laodiceans is that they are neither hot nor cold. The believers in Laodicean would have understood this imagery at once. It likely would have conjured up memories of tepid drinking water. As they heard these words, I imagine they could remember the disgusting taste of their water.

Many have interpreted Jesus' rebuke as pointing to the Laodicean church's spiritual condition. Being on fire for God is looked at as something desirable. That's not the point that Jesus is trying to make. Jesus wants the church to pick a side. Jesus wants them to be either hot or cold. Either one would work. Both hot and cold water have their place. Hot coffee warms the soul and body, while cold iced tea is refreshing on a summer's day. Both are enjoyable in their context. The room-temperature coffee you left on the kitchen table while attending to other matters is gross. The same can be said for lukewarm iced tea.

Because the Laodicean church is indifferent, apathetic, and reliant on its strengths and abilities, Jesus is about to spew them out of his mouth.

The wording in verse 16 is important. Jesus says, "I am about to spit you out," not "I am going to spit you out." As with the other churches that Jesus has chastised, the Laodicean Christians are given a chance to repent. They are given an opportunity to change their ways, to become either hot or cold.

In verse 17, we get the reason for Jesus' harsh words to the church. They are arrogant and self-reliant. In their arrogance, they say, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." Their affluence has significantly affected how they see themselves. We are all prone to this type of arrogant sin. In the good times, when we have the funds to do the things we want, we begin to believe that what we have is of our own doing and not a gift from God. Instead, Jesus' witness of them is true. Jesus sees who they are. Jesus knows they are "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

Even though the city is wealthy because of the commerce and banks established there, the Christians are poor. Even though the city is famous for its healing eye salve, the Laodicean Christians are blind. Even though the city is known worldwide for its fine textiles, the church is naked.

Then, in verse 18, Jesus counsels the church to "buy from me gold refined by fire." This verse begins Jesus' call for repentance. Gold refined by fire is a metaphor for a purified life. If the Laodicean Christians return, Jesus will robe them in white, covering their nakedness. In John's revelation, those who wear white are the saints who have conquered through their faith. Finally, Jesus will give them a salve for their eyes that really can cure their blindness. In other words, turn and repent, and Jesus will make them truly rich.

Listen!

The last section of the letter is well known and immortalized in paintings and gospel evangelism tracks. Jesus calls the church to listen. He's standing at their door, knocking, wishing to come in and commune with them. Often, this image is applied to evangelistic efforts. We tell those who do not yet know Christ that Jesus is knocking at the door of their heart. It's not wrong, for Jesus is always asking us to join with him. But that's not Jesus' point. Jesus isn't knocking at the door of unbelievers; Jesus is knocking at the entrance of the church. They have shut him out, and he desperately wants in so that he might share his abundant feast with them.

Throughout the Old Testament, a banquet describes what will happen when the Messiah finally comes. We find that image in Isaiah and at the end of Revelation. Jesus' knocking to get in so that he might eat with the

church is the same thing. Jesus longs to share his end-time banquet with them, but they cannot if they are unwilling to let Jesus back into the church.

To those who conquer, to those who choose a life of dependence upon God, they will eat with Christ and join him on his throne.

So What?

While all of the letters have been challenging for us to read, as they have all had something specific to say about how we live in this world, the letter to the Laodicean church hits a bit too close to home. We have been blessed beyond measure. We have money and possessions in abundance. We may not have said it out loud, but we have whispered to ourselves, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing."

I'm not saying that wealth is wrong. I believe God blesses us so we might turn around and bless others. Instead, we cling to what we have in a spirit of self-reliance. That's the American dream, isn't it? By the sweat of our brow, we can do or accomplish anything we set about to do. If we get knocked over, we pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. We begin to believe that we don't need God to live. The church starts to think that we don't need God to succeed.

Again, working hard is good. God wants us to work hard and use the gifts he's given us to make the world better. But we have to let the Spirit refine us. We must put off self-reliance, placing ourselves in God's loving hands. Only then will we be able to sit with Christ at his banquet table.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. In verse one, Jesus refers to himself as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation." Why do you think he describes himself the way? What does the word "amen" mean?
2. Both hot and cold water have a use, depending on their context. What do you think Jesus meant when he said that the Laodicean church was lukewarm? Which temperature do you think Jesus wanted the church to be? Justify your answers.

3. Jesus says that he's about to spit them out of his mouth. What might that imply?

4. Laodicea was a wealthy city situated at a critical crossroads. They were famous for their textiles, healing eye salve, and banks. Reread verse 17. What does the first half of the verse say about how the Laodicean church saw itself? In the second half of verse 17, Jesus describes what they are. Why would Jesus describe them that way? How do you think the church felt when they heard those words?

5. What do verses 18 and 19 mean?

6. Verse 20 is a famous verse that has been immortalized in paintings and evangelistic tracks. The image is often thought to communicate Jesus' desire to enter the nonbeliever's life. Given the context in which it is spoken, is this an appropriate interpretation? If so, why? If not, how would you interpret the image Jesus uses?

7. How are we similar or dissimilar to the Laodicean church?

8. How should we respond to an encounter with this passage?

Works Cited

Brian K. Blount, Revelation: A Commentary, ed. C. Clifton Black, M. Eugene Boring, and John T. Carroll, 1st Ed., The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).