



8. Laodicea: you make me sick!

Rev 3:14-22

We have come to the final leg of our tour around the Roman province of Asia. We have found that the letters to the churches in a society like ours 200 years ago are still a challenge to us as we face the difficulties of modern life.

What we have seen in our tour of seven churches is that what we consider values or even problems are viewed in a quite different way by the risen Christ. Our tour started with that amazing vision on Patmos. John was so struck by the glory and holiness of the risen Christ that he just fell at His feet as dead. That was an important point. As we look at these churches in Asia, we see that they all lacked that vision of glory and wonder. John needed reminding of just who Jesus is. The seven churches needed that too. They all needed to remember again the Lord whom they had first trusted - even John - the one whom Jesus loved! Ephesus had forgotten about love, Smyrna was about to have their love and faith strongly tested, Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis had indulged in immorality and idolatry, Philadelphai felt weak. All needed that injection of reality - of remembering again the holiness, power and glory of the risen Christ and the eternal nature of our faith.

And 2000 years later; here we are. There are so many elements from Roman Asia that are present in the modern church. We are warned about them to guard against shipwrecking our faith and our churches. The solution lies in understanding afresh just who Jesus is. And nowhere this comes over better than Laodicea.

Laodicea was the richest of a group of three cities - Laodicea, Colossae and Hierapolis. We are familiar with Colossae - Paul wrote a letter to them and it was the intention that the same letter was read in Laodicea. He also wrote to the Laodiceans but that letter never survived. Laodicea was a major commercial town - they were into textiles and garment making as it was a big sheep region. They were a financial centre too and it was famed for its wealth. It was a centre of medical excellence - they even developed an eye salve which made it famous. You can see all these pictures in how Jesus addresses them. It's main problem was a lack of water.

Heiropolis was a spa town with hot springs. Colossae was famous for its abundance of clean water and cold springs. Wealthy Laodicea built a massive stone aqueduct near the hot springs of Hieropolis to bring hot water down to the city. Unfortunately, the water cooled on its 6 mile journey so it arrived in Laodicea lukewarm.

To Jesus, that seemed a rather apt illustration for the church! Jesus reserves his most terse comments for Laodicea. What was their sin? It wasn't immorality and idolatry in the way three of the others had. It was just that they were lukewarm. Why is Jesus so harsh?

In one sense, the sins of Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis were self-evident. Idolatry and immorality are obvious sins. Everybody knows they are bad! But being lukewarm? Well, we think to ourselves, are they sins at all? One can be a good law-keeper and still be lukewarm. To Jesus, it isn't the keeping of the law, but the attitude of heart that is important. At least Pergamum, Sardis and Thyatira had something to their credit even though they had clearly sinned. The Lord has nothing good to say about Laodicea. They were uniformly like a bad cup of tea? lukewarm and fit for nothing better than to be poured down the sink.

In fact, their lukewarmness actually produced some of the harshest words in scripture. It is very rarely in scripture that God speaks words of revulsion to people. The Laodiceans are so lukewarm Jesus says, that it makes Him want to vomit them out of His mouth! In other words, to use a more modern phrase, He's saying "you make me so sick that I want to spit you out!" Ugh!

And we see the sin of Laodicea.? They were neither Heiropolis or Colossae. Their faith was not red hot and their faith had not grown cold. At least if they were total backsliders that would have been obvious. They were just kind of lukewarm. And what did that mean? 17 You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. They liked the idea of being a Christian but they were comfortable. I'm sure they were moral acceptable members of society that were faithfully at church meetings and worship. But they were not on fire for God. They had all they needed. They didn't need to worry about the things of God, because there were lots of comfortable things to do. They didn't see the need to trust God because they had their lifestyle to lean on. Jesus wants people hot with zeal, but they were warm and wishy-washy.

If anything characterises the people of God in Britain in 2006 it is Laodicea. It's not just me saying it either. Look at any commentary on this or listen to any sermon and the parallel is a striking one. We are part of the fourth richest country in the

world. We are more prosperous now than at any time in our history. And the church reflects that prosperity just as the one at Laodicea reflected the prosperity of its city. It's not that believers don't worship, faithfully attend things - it's just that they do not do it with that joy and wonder of Christ that He deserves ? the wonder John experienced on Patmos. What do they need with faith when they can buy what they need, when they have money in the bank, when their health is good - or if it's not there are doctors to help them?

The Laodiceans were rich, well clothed and had great doctors - so Jesus was only really needed when it suited. They saw their strength in wealth and numbers. That was what brought on Jesus? anger. It was not trust and obey ? it was call on God as and when it suited.

We see the contrast with Philadelphia. They are simply described as weak but they were offered an open door because of their desire to serve Christ and follow through thick or thin. And what did Jesus have to say about the Laodiceans? By the world?s standards they were rich, well clothed and healthy but to Jesus they were wretched ? poor, naked and blind spiritually. And His message was:

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

It rather reminds me of what Jesus says in Matthew?s gospel: 6: 19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Laodiceans opted for treasures on earth and their whole existence as a church was in question. Where is your treasure? We live in a society where the things of earth are more important to the church than Christ. I was brought up in an age where people were coming out of post-war austerity. To people of those times, what we have now is a land of plenty ? enjoying things we could never have before ? nice houses, cars, nice furniture, wonderful gadgets ? but where is the zeal and love for the things of God we had in our younger and less prosperous days?

If you don?t think that the Church of God in Britain is not a Laodicean church then look at the collapse of it over the last 30 years. It?s declining rapidly with little seeming to stop it. And the church? What are we doing about it? Leaders have their decades of evangelism, plans to plant churches, wonderful programmes that are well funded. And what happens? Decline continues apace? Where have we

gone wrong? We commit the sin of Laodicea. We want OUR lifestyle, we want our church as WE want it, we desire to see OUR churches full of people.

But what about Jesus? What about spending time in HIS presence, what about HIS church? The Laodiceans weren't bothered with this ? they just went in their lukewarm way.

Somebody said recently that the predictions that the church will be wiped out in Britain in 20 years were nonsense. You can't destroy the church of God. We've got lulled into the sense of security that comes from the fact that churches like this have been here for over 100 years. That doesn't guarantee anything. Look at what has closed.

In one sense what God builds, men can't destroy. But it doesn't stop Jesus spitting us out. And right now, fellowship after fellowship is being spat out because it's lukewarm. And that will continue until whoever remains repents or when the Lord sows new fellowships to replace the ones that have been spat out. Look at the closed buildings. Look at the backsliders. Look at the state of our churches. Spat out. destroyed. Lampstand removed. And if we don't pay heed tot he words of Jesus that will be our inevitable fate too.

That isn't my words. It's the words of revelation and you only have to look and see what God is doing. Where is the growth? Where are the new believers being won? Not in the old churches, but in new ones.

But there is a positive message to Laodicea and to us which Jesus left with them and which I leave with you as we close this series. The lampstand is still here ? it?s not to late to do something about it. What does that involve?

Get your wealth from the right place

I was intrigued by a report that came out this week on the subject of happiness. Despite the fact that people in Britain are richer than they have ever been, they are not happier. The Bible?s been saying that for thousands of years! Jesus said that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. Having everything does not meet your deepest personal need, let alone your spiritual needs.

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

Jesus uses the pictures from Laodicean commerce ? banking, garments and medicine to illustrate His point.

Where are you investing your time and energy? In the things of God? On yourself? On others? Let me ask a personal question that you can answer as before Jesus this morning? How much time do you spend with God? How much time do you spend in the quiet place Jesus encourages us to go to? How much time do you spend waiting in Him? How much time do you spend in prayer? How much time meditating on His word?

One of the things I've learned most in the last few years is that the quality of our spiritual lives is directly proportional to the time we spend with God. Spending time with God makes us rich in the things of God ? but probably won't fill our bank accounts; it covers our difficulty and embarrassment when we go through the difficulties of life we find hard to face because we have the confidence of knowing He's there ? He's really there. Spending time with Jesus opens our eyes to the things of God and His way.

The same is true of our church fellowship. The quality of our spiritual life is determined by the time we spend corporately as a fellowship with our Saviour and Master. A simple rule of thumb I've learned (the hard way actually) is that churches are only as good as their prayer lives. It doesn't matter what size, what type or whatever. The ones that seem to be going somewhere with God and are receiving His spiritual blessings are those with active prayer lives. It's a very effective measure of the spiritual health of a fellowship. So take a look at our prayer meetings and draw your own conclusions.

Be earnest and repent

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

If you feel a little beaten about by these scriptural truths that unfortunately our society and therefore ourselves are like the Laodiceans, then take heart from these words. Those I love I rebuke and discipline. I believe Jesus is rebuking the lukewarm faith of 2006 Britain, of 2006 Norfolk and of 2006 Swaffham. But He rebukes us because He loves us. So what do we do. In the NIV it says So be earnest, and repent. In older translations earnest is more correctly translated as be zealous. The Greek here is a word called zeloo from where we actually get the word zealous. The opposite is lukewarm is zealous. Jesus wants us to be like the waters of Hieropolis ? red hot for Him. So it's time to turn around and go His way. I've used the word repent a lot in the last seven sermons. Turn around; go Christ's way. But what is His way? The way is one to return to the zeal that we had when we

experienced the joy of His salvation. It's the same zeal that filled John as he saw the amazing vision of Christ. It is the same desire to be red-hot for Jesus ? to have a desire to be in His presence burning within us.

I remember the words of the two on the road to Emmaus as the risen Christ spoke to them about Himself. They said: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" We need to be people with burning hearts, a burning desire to be with Jesus and a burning desire to do His will. It's that that will revolutionise God's people from lukewarmness to the fire of the Spirit.

Let Jesus into your life

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

It seems a strange thing to say ? Let Jesus into your life. He isn't He? In one sense, yes. But we can shut Him out. In Philadelphia, Jesus offered an open door for the ?weak? Philadelphians that only sought to remain faithful. To those who desire the risen Christ, there is an open door. But Laodicea shows us another door ? a closed one. Laodicea was a closed door. They had everything so Jesus was just an extra and he had been shut out.

The wonderful thing about this verse is that it tells us that it's Jesus that desires to come through the door. It's Jesus that yearns for fellowship with us. It's Jesus that wants to come in and spend time with us. Where is our desire to be with Christ? Let me give you the words of a song. I don't think we know it so I'll read it rather than sing it!

*THIS IS THE AIR I BREATHE,
This is the air I breathe:
Your holy presence living in me.
This is my daily bread,
This is my daily bread:
Your very word spoken to me.*

*And I, I'm desperate for You.
And I, I'm lost without You.*

Marie Barnett

How desperate are we to spend time with Jesus? How much time do we spend each day? Just you and Him? Minutes? Seconds? Never?

How about with others? At a prayer meeting? At a housegroup? With another believer? Never? Which come back to our prayer lives. Thriving prayer life ? thriving church. Thriving prayer lives ? earnest believers. Thriving prayer lives ? people who love being in the presence of the risen Christ. Thriving prayer life ? red hot Christians.

The message for us is simple in 2006. Lukewarm church ? spat out. Red hot church ? thriving church with Jesus at the centre and believers conformed to His will.

We have a Saviour who dos not like spitting churches out. He want to come in and be the centre. It?s true in our personal lives too. He desires us. We need to return to the joy of our salvation, repent, open the door and desire Him come in.

Prayer of repentance and renewal.

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