

“OUR SICKENED SAVIOR”
REVELATION 3:14-19

It's been four months since we concluded our study in the book of Matthew, and I want to see if you remember anything. So, I'm going to start this morning with a pop quiz.

- What group of people upset Jesus the most when He was living on earth?
Jewish religious leaders.
- What was it about their attitudes and behavior that disturbed Him so much?
Their pride and pretense, their religious snobbery and showmanship, their hypocrisy, and their hollow spirituality.
- Are these attitudes and behaviors still abhorrent to Jesus? Do they still make Him upset?

These final two questions will be answered in Jesus' message to the church at Laodicea, which is perhaps the most familiar of the seven messages in Revelation 2 and 3. Due to its location the city of Laodicea was the final destination of the messenger charged with delivering these messages. It was about forty miles south of Philadelphia, and almost a hundred miles east of Ephesus. But Laodicea was by no means an isolated city. Two other prominent cities, Colossae and Hierapolis, were located in the same valley, within about ten miles of each other.

Ironically, while Laodicea was the youngest of the three cities, it was the most prosperous. In the first century, if you aspired to be a person of wealth, Laodicea was the place to be. It was a city of financial opportunity, for it manufactured and supplied goods for which the world was willing to pay a premium.

For example, it was the hub of the banking industry in Asia, banks that provided such things as checking accounts, credit, and international loans. These banks were known to charge up to 40 or 50% interest.

There was a famous medical school in Laodicea that manufactured and administered an expensive eye powder known as *Tephra-Phrygia*. It was considered a wonder drug for weak and ailing eyes, and people came from all over the world, paying exorbitant prices, hoping to improve their vision.

The most prominent commercial activity, however, was the textile industry. The region was ideal for the breeding of a certain black-wooled sheep, and the glossy wool that was extracted was manufactured in the city, made into expensive garments and carpets, then exported throughout the world. For years, Laodicean tunics set the fashion trends. It was the apparel of kings and the upper class.

In the midst of this well-to-do environment a prominent church existed that had a rich history. It's not known for certain how the church began, but it's possible that one of Paul's protégés, Epaphras, had been instrumental in helping the church take root. Paul himself commended the church at Laodicea in his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians, for early in its existence it had been a dynamic community of believers.

However, thirty years had passed. Jesus is addressing a new generation. **Verse 14.**
14 “And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

We might think it strange that Jesus would call Himself the “Amen,” since we generally think of *amen* as a word we tack onto the end of a prayer. But the word “amen” is an emphatic way of declaring the truth of something or someone. You may remember that when Jesus

was on earth, He often introduced a statement with the words, “Truly, truly...” Those words, in the Greek language, are *Amen, amen*.

Jesus is the absolute truth, and He reinforces this fact in the next phrase, “*The faithful and true witness*.” I would submit to you that this is not just a benign statement about the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Jesus. Jesus, here, is identifying Himself as the One who does not tolerate deceit, and as who will judge it severely. In Revelation 19, when describing the Second Coming of Jesus, John says, ¹¹ *Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war” (19:11)*. The faithful and true witness *is* a title for the Judge of all the earth who judges deception, hypocrisy, and pretense.

Jesus also identifies Himself as “*the beginning of God’s creation*.” If you have another translation it might read “the *ruler* of God’s creation”. The Greek word, here ($\alpha\rho\chi\eta$), can mean either *beginning* or *ruler*, and in this context, there is very little difference in the meaning.

Most often when Greeks used this word it did not have any reference to *time*, but to *rank* or *priority*. So, Jesus is not saying that He was the first created being, but that He is the highest ranking being. There is no one who is on the same level as Him. He is at the top all by Himself, and, because of this, He has supreme authority.

How does this aspect of Jesus’ character relate to the church? We have a natural tendency as human beings to compare ourselves with others and position ourselves so that we come out looking better or ranking higher. We compete for status and supremacy. We do this in a number of ways, but perhaps especially with our wealth. The city of Laodicea was called “*The Wealth of Asia*”. And it is not hard to imagine that because of their wealth there was a tendency to have an attitude of superiority.

“We’re better than all the other cities in Asia. Our church is better than all the other churches in Asia. Look at our resources. Look at our buildings. Look at our bank accounts. Look at the way people dress when they come to church. Look at the homes we live in. We’re pretty impressive!”

And Jesus, by identifying Himself the way He does, says, “Look, there is only one rank that really matters and that’s Mine. I am supreme. I am the Lord of the church. I alone determine what is true and right and good and successful.”

Look at **verses 15-16**. ¹⁵ *“I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.”*

This is a familiar verse to most of us, but we tend to interpret this verse in light of our own cultural concept of “hot” and “cold.” We think that Jesus is talking about spiritual passion, because that is how we interpret the metaphors of hot and cold. So, *hot* means that you are passionate about Jesus and His kingdom, and *cold* means that you have lost your passion for Jesus and His kingdom. *Lukewarm* means that you are somewhere in the middle. But is Jesus saying, “I wish you were either hot (passionate) or cold (passionless), but because you are lukewarm...I will spit you out of my mouth”? Would Jesus really rather us be passionless than lukewarm?

Let me suggest another meaning to these metaphors that has reference to Laodicean culture. Laodicea’s water supply came from two sources. There was an aqueduct running through the city of Laodicea that came from the nearby city of Hierapolis, which is visible from Laodicea. If you were to stand in the city center of Laodicea, as I have, and look toward Hierapolis, you would notice a large hill that looks as though it is made of salt. But it is not salt, it is the mineral deposits from the hot springs for which Hierapolis was famous—hot

springs that attracted lots of people in the first century who would go there and soak their ailing bodies. Today, Hierapolis, known as Pamukkale, is a tourist destination because of these hot springs.

But from Laodicea, even today, when you look toward Heirapolis you can also see the ruins of these aqueducts that the Romans built in order to pipe the hot, therapeutic water from Heirapolis to Laodicea. However, after completing these aqueducts, they discovered that by the time the hot water meandered through that aqueduct and reached Laodicea, it wasn't hot. It was lukewarm. Therefore, it had lost its therapeutic value. And it couldn't be used for drinking either because it contained high levels of sulfur and alum, and when consumed, it produced nausea.

So, what did Laodicea do for drinking water? They had to pipe it in from Colossae, which was known for its springs of ice-cold water. But those pipes were laid right on surface of the ground, much like an aqueduct, so that the cold water, after running through miles of stone pipe, arrived at Laodicea...lukewarm. It was like drinking out of a hose on a hot summer day. It was wet, but not refreshing.

Do you see what Jesus is saying here? "You are neither cold, like the icy, refreshing waters of Colossae, nor hot, like the therapeutic mineral waters of Hierapolis. I wish you were either one of the other. But because you are lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth."

That is a mild translation of the concept Jesus is trying to communicate. What Jesus is saying is that there was something about this church that made Him want to vomit. Vomiting is a metaphor that is intended to communicate that something is so disagreeable, so distasteful, so revolting, that it produces a violent internal reaction. And so, Jesus is expressing His utter revulsion for the spiritual condition of the Laodicean church.

What was it? I believe it is explained in **verse 17**. *17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*

The problem in the church at Laodicea was self-delusion. They thought that all was well - that things, in fact, couldn't be better - when in reality, according to Jesus, things couldn't be worse. They were living a lie and didn't even know it, a condition that was in sharp contrast to the character of Jesus - the Amen, the faithful and *true* Witness.

Apparently, they had transferred a principle from the business world and applied it to their church. The principle is quite simple, really. Success is determined by how much you have. So, the church, in good business fashion, took inventory of all its assets, its resources, its talents, its accomplishments, its reputation - whatever it was they thought had merit, and concluded that these things qualified them as a successful, dynamic church.

But Jesus said, "You are highly qualified to be utterly useless." Like the tepid waters that flowed into the city which could neither satisfy their thirst nor provide healing, so the church at Laodicea was failing to have any significant impact on the city. They were neither providing any spiritual healing for sin sick souls, nor were they quenching people's spiritual thirst by offering Living Water to those who so desperately needed it. They looked good on the outside, they looked like they had it together, but they were ineffective.

Jesus changes the metaphors in verses 17-18, and gets even more specific, in ways they would all understand. **Verse 17a**. *17 "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing..."*

The residents of Laodicea knew exactly what Jesus was talking about, here. In Laodicea's brief history there had been two earthquakes that had devastated the city. The first was in 17 AD, and in order to rebuild, the residents had to rely upon the financial

assistance of the Roman Emperor, Tiberius Caesar.

But when another earthquake did extensive damage to the city forty-three years later (60 AD), the townspeople turned down the offer of government assistance and chose to independently rebuild the city using their own resources. They famously said, “We are rich, we have prospered, and we need nothing.” And they were proud of that—proud of their self-sufficiency.

And while that kind of self-sufficiency may be a commendable quality during a physical catastrophe or crisis, it is a quality that is catastrophic when it comes to spiritual things. It usurps *faith* as our mode of operation. It gives us a false sense of security and accomplishment. And it takes our eyes off of Jesus and tempts us to pat ourselves on the back and say, “Look what we’ve done! Aren’t we something?”

Notice how self-absorbed this church was in verse 17. “I am this, I have that. I have done such and such.” They were so pre-occupied with themselves and what they had accumulated and accomplished, that it seems they didn’t much care about anything else. They were smug and they were proud.

But Jesus says of them, “You are badly mistaken, for you are, in reality, *wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*”

All these things had some reference to the things that made Laodicea famous. Jesus says, “I know all about the banks and the booming industries and the material wealth that are part of your community. But you are *spiritually* impoverished. You’re a rich church living in a spiritual ghetto.

“I know that *Tephra-Phrygia* is easily accessible to you, but you are spiritually blind. You’re oblivious to spiritual realities. You’re groping about in the darkness of pride, vanity, and hypocrisy.

“I know that you clothe your bodies with expensive garments made from those black-wooled sheep, but in reality, you are spiritually naked. Your souls are exposed revealing a shameful condition. I can see right through you and it’s not a pretty sight.”

Verse 18. *“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.”*

This is advice to invest in what Jesus has to offer. He offers real gold. Not fool’s gold, but gold that stands the test of time and will endure for all eternity; gold refined in the fire that has been purified and tested to be true. What is this gold? I believe Jesus is referring to the wealth of His love and grace and mercy. The riches of having an intimate relationship with him, which is the most precious and valuable thing we could possibly have. Verse 20 speaks about this, which we will explore next week.

Have you invested in Christ’s gold? Have you unlocked the treasure chest of His love and grace and mercy? If not, you will die a pauper, your life on this earth will have been wasted, and you will one day experience another side of His character - His justice and His wrath.

Then Jesus talks about white garments, which is an intentional contrast to the black garments that were fashionable in the day. Elsewhere in Scripture white robes are symbolic of the righteousness of Jesus Christ - the only thing which can cover our spiritual nakedness. It is His righteousness that makes us presentable to God and worthy to be in His presence, unashamed and without condemnation. It is His righteousness which gives us status in the eyes of the only One whose opinion really matters - our heavenly Father.

What kind of clothing are you wearing? Are you dressed in your own righteousness,

your own good works, your reputation, your image, your heritage? If so, they will not be good enough to gain access into His presence. For the Bible says, "*Our righteousness is as filthy rags*" (Jer.). We need to be dressed in His righteousness.

Finally, Jesus talks about correcting their spiritual vision. Not with the famous *tephra phrygia* manufactured in their city, but with His own remedy, a remedy that is guaranteed to renew one's mind and give one a new perspective and clear vision.

How's your vision of Christ and His kingdom? Do you see Him clearly or has He been obscured by the world's values? I will tell you this: If we see clearly, we will see right through the folly and the vanity of worldly wealth, status, image, and reputation. We will see them for what they are, and never rely on them for our success and our health. We will understand how deceptive they can be and how easily we can be seduced, and, as a result, become self-sufficient, smug, and self-reliant which render us utterly useless in the kingdom of God. And when we get in that condition, it makes Jesus want to throw up.

I don't want Jesus to feel that way about us. I want Him to take pleasure in us; to delight Himself in us and enjoy fellowship with us. That's what we will be talking about next week, Lord willing.

Verse 19. "*Those whom I love I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.*"

Jesus didn't mince words with the church at Laodicea. He called them out for their self-delusion and their smugness, telling them straight up that they made Him feel like throwing up. But Jesus said these harsh things because He loved them, for the one who loves you the most is the one who tells you the truth, even if it hurts.

Jesus reproves and disciplines the ones He loves, and that discipline is never pleasant. It may sting and it may shame, but it is administered in order to get us back on track with Jesus, and in that sense His discipline is gracious and merciful, even if it is severe.

May Jesus keep us from becoming self-satisfied and smug. May we never become self-sufficient, thinking that we have the strength and resources in ourselves to do the Lord's work.

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Main Idea: *Jesus is revolted by pretense and hypocrisy and will not tolerate it in His church.*

Jesus identifies Himself (14)

The Amen

The faithful and true witness

The beginning of God’s creation

Jesus’ assessment of the church (15-17)

The metaphors of cold, hot, and lukewarm (15-16a)

The therapeutic hot springs of Heirapolis

The refreshing cold waters of Colossae

The reaction of Jesus (16b)

The reason for Laodicea’s lukewarmness (17)

The earthquake in 60 AD

The banking industry

The “wonder” drug *Tephra-Phrygia*

The famous black-wooled garments

Jesus’ counsel for the church (18-19)

Buy Jesus’ gold (18a)

Wear Jesus’ “white” garment (18b)

Use Jesus’ “eye” medicine (18c)

Be zealous and repent (19)