

The Complacent Church: Laodicea

¹⁴ "And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God.'¹⁵ "I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot.¹⁶ "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.¹⁷ "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'-- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked--¹⁸ "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.¹⁹ "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. 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 dine with him, and he with Me.²¹ "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit 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.'" (Rev 3:14-22)

At the end of World War 2, NATO and Stalin essentially came to an agreement to divide up the Europe which Hitler had conquered. Those Western European countries came to be known as NATO countries, and those under some kind of Soviet influence or control became known as Warsaw Pact countries. In the 45 year from 1945 to the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1990, those two sets of countries went in very different directions. For the most part, those Western European nations that had free-market economics did fairly well, prospered financially, and became used to the abundance that the 20th century and its technology brought. On the other hand, those Eastern European countries that came under some form of Soviet inspired socialism or communism became steadily poorer, and by the time the Berlin wall came down, it was obvious that Warsaw Pact countries were financially devastated and impoverished.

As far as an experiment in economics goes, those 45 years showed the world how well socialism and capitalism work in the real world. But those 45 years proved something else. In Western Europe, there was an abundance of wealth, and freedom to practice Christianity. In Eastern Europe, there was much hardship, physical poverty and much persecution of Christianity. And when the wall came down, what was the state of Christianity on either side of the wall? In free, prosperous Western Europe, the church was all but dead. Liberalism had spread through all the mainline denominations; the universities were completely secular, and biblical Christianity was considered a relic of the past. In persecuted, poor Eastern Europe, the church was strong, with thousands of unofficial churches meeting in houses, with imprisoned pastors and Bibles and literature were smuggled in. When restrictions were lifted, churches in Ukraine, Russia and Romania saw thousands of people come to Christ.

The point is not that communism is necessary for Christianity. The point is not that the free market is the enemy of Christianity. The point is simply: when wealth and comfort dominate, very often, faith and commitment evaporate.

That's what happened to the last of these seven churches - the church at Laodicea. These seven churches were actual churches in Asia Minor, but Jesus selected them as timeless examples to all churches of all time. And with only two exceptions – the Crowned Church at Smyrna, and the Conquering Church at Philadelphia, the churches show a steady decline. Ephesus was the cooling church, orthodox but lacking in love. Pergamos was the compromising church, dabbling in idolatry. Thyatira had gone further with its compromise, until it was now corrupt, and the teaching of Jezebel had come to dominate. The church at Sardis was essentially dead, the corpselike church, with only a few who had not soiled their garments. And now, this last church was the worst of all, the complacent church.

Laodicea was a great city to live in. It was extremely wealthy, sitting on the meeting place of several trade routes. In fact, it was so wealthy, that when an earthquake destroyed the city in the year 60, the Laodiceans rebuilt their whole city without asking for a cent from Rome. They were rich. One of their biggest sources of income was their wool. They made a glossy, black wool, that was worn by the wealthy and powerful throughout Rome.

They were also famous for their medical school, identified with the god of healing, Asclepius. This medical school developed a special remedy for the eyes, which became world-famous.

But with all these good things, the city, had one terrible weakness: its water supply. Laodicea had no natural water supply and had to pipe its water through two large stone pipes. The water was so impure and filled with calcium that it often clogged the pipes. The water that arrived in Laodicea was not pure or tasty.

As we study this church, I think we find a church most similar to the unpersecuted church of the 21st century. Though I don't think this church was anything like a Gospel-teaching and preaching church like ours, there are still dangers to avoid, warning to take, lessons to learn.

I. Condemnation & Caution

¹⁵ *"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot."*¹⁶ *"So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."*

Jesus has nothing good to say to this church. In fact, this church gets Christ's most scathing rebuke. He begins by saying, you are neither hot nor cold, and I wish you were one or the other. The Laodiceans knew what Jesus meant. About 15km to their northeast was the city of Hierapolis, known for its hot springs. About 18km to their east was Colossae, which was known for its ice-cold springs. As mentioned, Laodicea had built aqueducts to pipe water in, but by the time it arrived, the water was neither hot like in Hierapolis, or cold as in Colossae: it was lukewarm and tepid, and tinged with a sulphuric taste.

We all know that a hot drink on a cold day is deeply comforting. We know how refreshing a cold drink on a hot day can be. But who enjoys a lukewarm drink? When we expect that contrast in our mouths, and get a tepid, lukewarm taste, it is disappointing, and even sickening. One historian said that the water was so impure and so lukewarm that it had an emetic effect, that is, it caused vomiting.

That's why Jesus says He is about to vomit them out of His mouth. They disappoint and nauseate. Jesus would prefer they be hot or cold, and by that I don't think Jesus means He would prefer them to be sinful. He is saying, their lukewarm condition is as nauseating as a lukewarm drink; we all prefer what we drink to be hot or cold. With the zealous believer, Jesus enjoys it. With the cold, lost sinner, Jesus knows what He has. But with the lukewarm one, the one professing faith but having none, it is nauseating. Jesus prefers the tax collector over the Pharisee.

But what does it mean that this church was lukewarm? Well, Jesus tells us what their lukewarm condition was.

¹⁷ *"Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'*

This was a church that had become in one word, complacent. They were materially wealthy. They had an abundance. They said it of themselves. They reflected on the fact that they had grown wealthy, and increased their wealth. And it added up to one conclusion: we have need of nothing. They had become so content in their material life, so self-satisfied, so self-sufficient, they no longer saw themselves as needy people. They no longer craved grace. And once you don't need grace, yo don't need grace, and you don't need Christ, and you don't need the Gospel.

When it comes to lukewarmness, there is one thing we want to be lukewarm, and it is the air temperature. We want it just right – not too hot, and not too cold. We don't want to feel the need for a heater, and we don't want to feel a need for an air-conditioner. This is how this church felt about their own lives, it felt just perfect. We have all we need and more, we are insured against all problems, we don't have to pray, or ask, or seek, or humble ourselves, or launch out, or take steps of faith. We have what we need.

And I ask you to look at that verse, and take it to any unbeliever in the world, and ask him if he sees a problem with living like that. You could make that the motto of secularism. It could be the creed written on the Tower of Babel. We have got what we need for now and the future, we don't need anything else.

When you get to that place, it feels very comfortable. It tastes nauseating to Christ, but it feels good to you who are in it. But sadly, their environment had made them so comfortable that they had become insensible. They had become like the drunk who undresses himself; like the drug addict who feels no hunger after his latest hit; like the sedated man who feels relaxed and happy though his life is crumbling around him. They were intoxicated with their physical material condition, and could not see what Christ saw.

- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked--

Jesus says, you are actually spiritually wretched, pitiable, destitute, blind, and naked. You are in the worst place: spiritually rotten, and content to be so. Your wealth has blinded you to your spiritual need. You have insulated yourself against physical needs and threats and think that this translates into spiritual health. In reality, Jesus says, as I look at your souls and spiritual health, I see destitution, beggarly, shameful, confused. Here is a church with no genuine love for Christ, no rewards stored up in heaven, no Christ likeness in life and deed, no wisdom to see life as God sees it. Like in the Emperor's New Clothes, here was a church believing it was very pleasing to God, and Jesus saw it as it was, and called it as He saw it.

Lukewarmness is the spiritual state of complacency which so often comes when we do not notice and remain aware of our spiritual neediness. In a lukewarm state, prayer just about dies, for who prays that feels no needs? When lukewarm, reading the Word dies, for who treats God's Word like living bread if you are already full? When lukewarm, evangelism dies, for who tells his neighbour about his need of salvation if he doesn't sense the need himself? When lukewarm, commitment to Christ's church dies, for who gathers and serves the Body if you say to the body what Paul describes in 1 Cor 12 "I have no need of you." When lukewarm, fasting, brokenness, and soul-searching die, for who seeks growth and cleansing and renewal when he feels no need for it?

You live with a foot in the world, and a foot in the church. You hedge your bets by betting on both this world, and the one to come. You make two families your family, you want to walk in the flesh and in the Spirit, you want the world and the kingdom. This world is too much your friend and safety net.

Riches don't have to do this, but they easily can. Physical needs can be a blessing and in God's church, there will always be rich and poor. We do not have to be communists to be pleasing to God. But for all of us, however much God blesses us with, we have to guard our souls against the spiritual dangers of comfort.

Pro 30:9 *Lest I be full and deny You, And say, "Who is the LORD?" Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God.*

Mat 6:24 *"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.*

Unconsecrated riches can take us away from Christ. Having the support of material comforts can make grace and the Gospel seem far away. Remember when Christ told His shocked disciples:

" 24 "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Mat 19:24)

He was saying: it is unusual, and unlikely, when someone creates a life with no needs, for him to deeply sense his need of Christ. That's what had happened to this church.

II. The Counsel

¹⁸ "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

Here was a church so content in their own buying power, that they no longer had Jesus Christ in their church, and at the centre. So Christ uses a commercial metaphor: since you are such wealthy people, why don't you buy from Me three real items. Buy from Me, gold tried in the fire to be truly rich. The Laodiceans were wealthy, but they were not rich in good works.

1Ti 6:18 *Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share,*

They were rich but not in eternal rewards. Jesus says, come to Me, make Me the centre and source of your life.

He says, buy from Me white garments to clothe you and cover up your home. Laodicea was known for its black woolen garments. The rich in Rome were most often clothed in black wool from Laodicea. And maybe with a touch of irony, Jesus says, buy white garments from me – the robes of righteousness, the garment of my imputed and imparted righteousness.

He says, buy from Me eye-salve to rub on your eyes so you can see. Laodicea was actually world-famous for an ointment for sore ears and an eye powder for sore eyes. It was made into a small cake or

tablet, which would be ground up, and then applied to the eyes.

The true riches of His rewards; the true clothing of His righteousness; the true sight of His wisdom.

What it amounts to is Jesus saying: make Me your one and only supplier. Make Me the One you trade with first of all. And here is the thing about buying from Christ - to buy from Him, He not only supplies the goods, He supplies the currency.

Isa 55:1 *"Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price."*

Grace. Grace is requesting and receiving, with no merit of your own. Grace is coming to Jesus for all He is to you, and knowing you have no buying power. You fall on your knees and you fall on His goodness. You can only give Jesus one thing: your entire being, your entire trust.

"For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it. (Mar 8:35)"

A longing for grace is the very opposite of self-satisfied complacency. The only people who ask for grace are people who feel and know their need and their bankruptcy.

Mat 9:12 When Jesus heard that, He said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.

And here is how gracious Jesus is. A self-satisfied church actually shuts Jesus out altogether. He is outside the church. But verse 20 shows us His gracious call.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me."

Jesus knocks. He is persistent, but not pushy. Though he is Lord of the church, He does not break the door down because you do not have a meal with an invader, you have a meal with an invited guest. So Jesus says, if you hear this call from Me, to place Me again at the absolute centre of what you do, if you open the door, I will come in. Notice, I will come in to *him*. I will take up my abode in him, and we will enjoy mutual fellowship.

These words hearken back to Song of Songs.

Sol 5:2-4 *THE SHULAMITE* *"I sleep, but my heart is awake; It is the voice of my beloved! He knocks, saying, 'Open for me, my sister, my love, My dove, my perfect one; For my head is covered with dew, My locks with the drops of the night.'"*

In that situation, a newly married bride gets too comfortable in her warm bed, and her spouse knocks at the door but as she delays and dithers and complains about already being in bed, he stops knocking. When she goes to the door, he is gone, and she goes looking for him, and is hurt and harmed as she now searches for the one who was within easy reach at one point. We should take warning: Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon the Lord while He is near. Don't let your comforts become a spiritual anaesthetic. Enjoy God's gifts, but don't allow them to make you so comfortable that you care not that Christ is outside.

This is how Jesus summarises this counsel:

¹⁹ *"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent."*

Jesus rebukes and trains those He loves. That is, He loves them, and they are to take this letter as His love. Jesus says, know that I love you, be zealous and repent. Here's what's interesting about this word 'zealous': it is a similar word in the original to the word for hot back in verse 15 and 16. Jesus prescribes a fervent, boiling, zest-filled response to overcome their lukewarm indifference. They need to repent, turn from their self-sufficient, Christ-rejecting sloth, apathy, and complacency.

Do you know how you turn a lukewarm liquid into a hot one? Not by adding more lukewarm liquid. The only way to heat it up is to add more heat energy. And when spiritual lethargy, and sleepiness has set in due to all our creature comforts, the way we repent is by immediately attacking the plateau, and adding the fire and heat of Christ-centred obedience. Businessmen know that when your business has begun to plateau, the only way you prevent a decline is by attacking that flatline with some vigorous targets, and ambitious goals.

If you have lapsed into a dopey-eyed cruise mentality, the way you get out of that is with some vigorous change to your spiritual disciplines, with Christ at the absolute centre. Vigorous repentance; heartfelt, humble faith, prayer, the Word, worship, evangelism, service, giving. You change the temperature of the water by changing the level of Christ-centred trust, submission, commitment and zeal.

Because who are you doing this for?

"And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:'"

The Amen - Christ is the Amen of all God's promises, according to 2 Corinthians 1:20. He is the absolute certainty that what God has said He will do, He will do.. God has no promises to you, no obligations to you, no debt to you outside of Christ. If you reject Him, God rejects you. We are to repent and come to Christ because He is the Amen.

He is also the faithful and true witness. This world is full of smoke and mirrors, propaganda and media lies. You can put your trust in Cosmo, Oprah, newspaper editorials, or you can trust Christ as the faithful and true witness.

He is also the Beginning of the Creation of God. This doesn't mean He was the first thing God created. He means all things were created through Him, that the very first atom of the universe came through the creative hands of the Son of God. Who are you going to make your life around: the Giver or the Gifts? The Creator or the creation?

Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and no man comes to the Father except through Him. Jesus said to this church, and He says to you, stop shopping with the created world for your purposes and happiness, and stop pretending to be religious. Come to Me, and Me alone for your true riches and clothing and sight. Let Me in, and we will have real fellowship.

III. The Challenge

²¹ *"To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.*

The overcoming one will get to sit down with Me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne.

If you live a genuine Christian life, and love Him and persevere, you will truly reign. Royalty in this life are indeed rich, with increased goods and have their needs met. But Jesus says, it will not be an illegitimate reign. It will not be the reign of a rebel. It will not be a little Tower of Babel, a self-created heaven of earth, a self-made kingdom. He says, no, you will indeed sit in a place of honour and royalty, and wealth with Me.

But how did Christ come to that place? Of course, as God the Son, He had all honour from eternity past. But as the God-Man, Christ earned a throne over all men through His humility.

⁵ *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,⁶ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God,⁷ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond-servant, and coming in the likeness of men.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.⁹ Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, (Phi 2:5-9)*

2Ti 2:12 *If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us.*

I have told you before that some Romanian pastors have said that twenty years of Western Christianity and Western pop culture has done more damage to their churches than 40 years of communism. Money is not the enemy. Freedom of religion is not the enemy. Human self-sufficiency is the enemy. When we have the privilege of freedom, and the privilege of wealth, we must watch, and guard our souls against complacency. We must fight all the harder be zealous, to be Christ-centred.

He that has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.