



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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**What the Spirit Is Saying to the Churches:  
Realize and Repent!  
Revelation 3:14-22**

Come January, I will have been in ordained ministry for 30 years. I've been a local church pastor for 28 of those years, and worked in church relations at one of our Baptist universities for two years. I've preached in or had contact with a lot of Baptist churches over those three decades. And I've never seen a Baptist church named *Laodicea*.

Ephesus, Smyrna, Philadelphia, Antioch, even Sardis and Corinth. But *never* Laodicea. There's a reason for that.

In his little work on the book of Revelation, Bruce Metzger points out in a footnote that

The Laodicean church is the only one of the seven to add an adjective to the English language—and a pretty discreditable one at that! The word *Laodicean* is defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as “indifferent or lukewarm esp. in religion.”<sup>1</sup>

The church at Laodicea was what most Baptists *don't* want our churches to be like.

And then I decided to do a Google search to see if there is a Baptist church named Laodicea, and to my surprise . . . there were at least five! I hope they didn't realize what they were doing when they chose that name!

Today we've come to the last sermon in this series on the letters of the risen Lord Jesus to the seven churches in the ancient province of Asia in what we know today as Turkey. He sent these letters through his servant John to the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

The letters to the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira included both commendations and calls to repentance. The letters to the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia were all commendation, calling the Smyrnaens to faithfulness in the face of persecution and the Philadelphians to faithfulness in the face of both opposition and opportunity. The letter to the church at Sardis was almost all condemnation and a call to repentance, but Jesus did recognize that there was a small group within the church who were remaining faithful to him.

But this letter to the Laodicean church is *all* a word of condemnation and judgment and a call to repentance. Jesus found *nothing* good to say about them.

Listen to this last letter from Jesus . . . *Read text* . . .

<sup>14</sup> "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. <sup>15</sup> I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm-- neither hot nor cold-- I am about to spit you out of my mouth. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. <sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. <sup>22</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

### *The church at Laodicea<sup>2</sup>*

Laodicea was the wealthiest city in the region of Phrygia in the ancient province of Asia. It was located about a hundred miles east of Ephesus where three important roads converged. It was the most important city in the Lycus valley. Two others, Colossae and Hierapolis also had Christian churches in them. The three cities' locations formed a triangle, with Hierapolis to the north of Laodicea about six miles and Colossae to the east of Laodicea about ten miles.

In the New Testament, the only other mention of the church at Laodicea besides the list of the seven churches in Revelation 1:11 is in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Toward the end of that letter (4:12-13, 15-16), Paul mentions how Epaphras, as a servant of Christ, has worked hard among the Colossians and those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. Then he asks the Colossians to give his greeting to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and to have this letter read in the church there. Likewise, he had sent a letter to the church at Laodicea, and wanted the Colossians to read it as well. But that's about all we have from the New Testament. The church is mentioned a number of times in other ancient Christian literature from the first four centuries.

Now the city of Laodicea was known for three things: its banks; its linen and wool industry, especially a naturally shiny black wool used to make clothing and carpets; and its medical school and medicines, especially a particular eye ointment made from a powder produced in the region.

Not far away—about the distance from here to the edge of Broadway—Hierapolis was known for its hot springs that were famous for their medicinal qualities. The water from those springs flowed south-southwest to Laodicea. But by the time it made this six-mile journey over the plateau and poured over a cliff opposite Laodicea, it had lost most of its heat and had become lukewarm. At Hierapolis, it was *healing* water. But if people drank it lukewarm at Laodicea, it made them *sick*.

Laodicea was a very wealthy and self-sufficient city. So much so that when a devastating earthquake hit the area around A.D. 60, according to the Roman historian Tacitus (*Annals* 14.27.1), while the surrounding cities gladly accepted Roman aid to rebuild, the Laodiceans refused it!

And the church at Laodicea had fit right into this culture—just like we so often fit into ours!

### *The letter from Jesus*

In his letter to this church through John, Jesus identified himself as “the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation” (3:14).<sup>3</sup>

The word *amen* is a word originating from the Hebrew that we use, particularly in worship, to affirm our agreement with something. When Jesus made statements, particularly in John’s Gospel, that began as our English Bibles translate variously as “truly, truly” or “truly I say to you” or “verily, verily,” the word Jesus actually used was “amen, amen.” Here Jesus was emphasizing that as the Amen, he is identified with the God of Truth of the Old Testament, and so he is the witness who is faithful and true. He never lies, and he can always be trusted.

Jesus also identified himself as “the ruler of God’s creation.” Here the NIV has translated the Greek word with a meaning that is possible, but a more prominent meaning for the word is *beginning* or *origin* or *ultimate source*. When you put this letter alongside Paul’s letter to the Colossians that the Laodiceans would have probably have still been familiar with, the two resonate. In Colossians 1:15-17 (RSV), Paul emphasized the pre-eminence of Christ as the source of all creation:

For in him all things were created . . . all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

So the Laodiceans needed to listen carefully to what he who is faithful and true and the origin of God’s creation was about to say to them.

It was not a pleasant message. As Jesus said to all the other churches, he now told them, “I know . . .” In this case, he knew their deeds, that they were “neither cold nor hot” (3:15). Then he said, “I wish you were either one or the other! So because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (3:15-16).

*Lukewarm*—to be lukewarm is to be tepid, to be moderately warm.

Now there are some things that taste good either hot or cold. I love iced tea, and I have come to enjoy hot tea. But when the hot tea has cooled to the point of being lukewarm, or the iced tea has warmed to room temperature—there’s a scientific word for that: *yuck!*

I enjoy hot coffee, and some members of my family like cold coffee products—iced coffee drinks, coffee flavored ice cream and such. To me, cold and coffee just don’t go together, but they love it. But none of us like lukewarm coffee!

I remember when I was in seminary, one of the last fall semester chapel services in early December was always a Moravian Love Feast, celebrated with hot coffee and Moravian bread. One year I was seated toward the back of Binkley Chapel for that service. By the time they finally got to me with the coffee, it was room temperature. I tried, but I just couldn’t drink it! I didn’t spit it out, but I wanted to.

The NIV’s translation of what Jesus went on to say here, like most other recent ones, is very polite when Jesus says, “I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” What it’s really talking about is what happened when people tried to drink the lukewarm waters near the city. It made them sick to their stomachs! Whatever term you want to use, it wasn’t pleasant for the person or those around them!

Can you imagine Jesus saying to us as a church, “You are lukewarm! You make me sick to my stomach! I’m about to spew you out of my mouth!”

What was it about the Laodiceans that Jesus reacted to this way?

The issue for the Laodicean church was *self-sufficiency*. They thought they had arrived, that they had everything under control. They could take care of themselves. They didn't really need to depend on Christ.

When Jesus said that they say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing," he was pointing to *their pride*. They had acquired wealth—it was by *their* efforts that they had all these possessions. George Ladd makes the connection clear in his commentary when he says: "Spiritual complacency was accompanied by spiritual pride."

Ladd points out how like the church at Sardis, the Laodicean church was "an example of nominal, self-satisfied Christianity." He goes on to say that while there was a nucleus in Sardis that still had a vital faith, "the entire Laodicean church was permeated by complacency."<sup>4</sup>

You might say they were suffering from a condition that someone recently named *affluenza*. As Ladd puts it, their active participation in the affluence of their surrounding society resulted in that *affluence* having a deadly *influence* on the church's spiritual life.

So they had become *lukewarm*—self-sufficient, proud, complacent, with no dependence on or zeal for Christ—spiritually sickening.

But Jesus wasn't willing to leave them there. Though they were materially rich, they were spiritually "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked" (3:17). Notice how that mirrors what the city was known for—its wealth, its medicines, and its clothing. He told them that though they were rich in the things of this world, they needed *his* riches and raiment and remedy (3:18).

And then he told them that *he loved them*. "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline" (3:19). So they should be zealous and repent! They should turn to him and follow his ways. And he used that powerful picture of promise to call them to that repentance: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (3:20, ESV). Those who responded to his call would enjoy the closest of fellowship and friendship with him.

As in the other letters, Jesus promised eternal life to the one who overcomes, pictured here as sitting with Jesus on his throne just as he overcame and sat down with the Father on his throne (3:21).

And then he said, "Let the one who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (3:22).<sup>5</sup>

Jesus called the Laodicean church to repent of its spiritual lukewarmness. History seems to bear out that this church heard what the Spirit was saying and did repent and open the door to Jesus. The ancient church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, in Book 7 of his work entitled *Ecclesiastical History*, traces some of the history of the church in Laodicea, especially its leaders, beyond the pages of the New Testament. As they repented, God continued to work among them and through them.

### ***The church at Jonesboro Heights***

But what about us? Are *we* listening to what the Spirit has been saying to us through these letters in Revelation? *Jesus is calling us to realize and repent of our spiritual lukewarmness—our lack of zeal and dependence and commitment, our complacency.*

Are we, as a congregation, lukewarm? Are we depending on ourselves and our own resources rather than on Christ? Have we become proud and self-sufficient, looking at what God has blessed us with through the years and saying, "We're rich, we have acquired wealth; we don't need anything"? Is our practice of Christianity filled with genuine love and zeal for Christ,

or are we just going through the motions as individuals and as a congregation? That's a dangerous thing, you know.

In his commentary on this passage, George Beasley-Murray said:

To have enough religion to disguise one's need of a living faith is to be in a worse condition than having no faith at all. An honest atheist is more acceptable to the Lord than a self-satisfied religious man, for such a man's religion has blunted his conscience and blinded him to his need for repentance. The road to the cross has always been easier for the publican than the Pharisee.<sup>6</sup>

So what about us? Will we share in deep fellowship with Christ, or will he spew us out of his mouth?

It all depends on *our* response to him.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 44.

<sup>2</sup> These commentaries have been helpful in my interpretation of this text: Morris Ashcraft, "Revelation" in *the Broadman Bible Commentary*; David Aune, "Revelation" in *The Word Biblical Commentary*; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Book of Revelation*; George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*; Bruce Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*; Charles Talbert, *The Apocalypse: A Reading of the Revelation of John*.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

<sup>4</sup> Ladd, 64-66.

<sup>5</sup> My translation

<sup>6</sup> Beasley-Murray, 105.