The ancient city of Laodicea could be reached by following the Roman postal route about 40 miles SE from Philadelphia. It was built in the third century B.C. by the Seleucid king, Antiochus II, who named it after his wife, Laodice. Located on the floor of the Lycus Valley, the city enjoyed the scenic beauty of the place where the Lycus River joins the Meander River, Mount Cadmus forming the backdrop.

The city of Laodicea enjoyed many natural and commercial advantages. Its fertile valley boasted quality agriculture. In fact, the area became famous for its black wool textile industry, the wool being harvested from a species of sheep still found in the area. Located at a crossroads, the city not only became a trading centre but a large banking centre, the city's one major problem was its water supply. The Lycus and Meander rivers were too dirty; and most springs in the area are hot springs, full of gases and other chemicals. Yet that is what the Laodiceans had to use - water from hot springs, piped in from some distance through twin lines of stone pipe (the remains of which can still be seen) to a locally built water tower. The water carried by these pipes was so charged with impurities that it dropped much of its load in flow; the calcium carbonate gradually clogging the pipes. And yet, when the water arrived in the homes of the city, it was still only barely drinkable. It was lukewarm, nauseous, tepid, rather disgusting.

At nearby Colossae there was fresh, cold water, from the only good spring in the valley. Closer yet, Hierapolis boasted hot water, excellent for medical baths and pools. But Laodicea enjoyed neither the hot nor the cold; it endured the lukewarm, the nauseous.

Just what is meant by this charge? The Laodiceans themselves would understand, because the charge reflected the physical experience of everyone in the city. The city's one major problem was its water supply. The Lycus and Meander rivers were too dirty; and most springs in the area are hot springs, full of gases and other chemicals. Yet that is what the Laodiceans had to use - water from hot springs, piped in from some distance through twin lines of stone pipe (the remains of which can still be seen) to a locally built water tower. The water carried by those pipes was so charged with impurities that it dropped much of its load in flow; the calcium carbonate gradually clogging the pipes. And yet, when the water arrived in the homes of the city, it was still only barely drinkable. It was lukewarm, nauseous, tepid, rather disgusting.

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some life, but not much; with some fervency, but only a little; with some
love for truth, but little industry. Rather, he is using language everyone
in the Lycus Valley would understand, to tell the church that he found
them disgusting and nauseous. This church was neither refreshingly
pleasant, like the cool, clear waters of Colossae, nor wholesome and
healing, like the Hierapolis hot springs. Rather, it was so nauseous the
Lord could only just barely put up with it. That is why Jesus
says he wishes they were either hot or cold. He is not saying that
spiritual coldness is necessarily to be preferred to spiritual lukewarmness.
Such an interpretation confuses the symbol with what is symbolized.

What, then, is the content behind the Laodicean church’s ‘lukewarm-
ness’? The answer is provided for us in 3.18. Jesus says, ‘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’. In a word,
the sin of this church is complacent self-sufficiency. The church had
adopted the attitude of the city after the earthquake: ‘I can look after
myself, thank you very much’. There is no poverty of spirit, no self-
contrition, no brokenness, no meekness. They think they are rich, both
materially (like the rich fool of Luke 12.19-21), and spiritually. Yet the
tragedy, and the spiritual repulsiveness, lies in their self-delusion.

Jesus says they are poor, spiritually bankrupt – in a city proverbial for
its wealth. Jesus says they are blind, devoid of spiritual vision – in a
city renowned for its Phrygian eyesalve. Jesus says they are naked,
spiritually shamed, wearing nothing but the rags of self-righteousness –
in a city famous for its textile industry. Yet more ugly than any of these
ironies is the greatest irony of all: this church is blissfully unaware of its
poverty, its blindness, and its nakedness. There was an unbridgeable
abyss between what Christ thought of them, and what they thought of
themselves. This is the content of the Laodiceans’ “lukewarmness”.

How careful must we be not to put the cheat upon our own souls! Are
the churches of which we form a part havens for a kind of spiritual
arrogance which displaces poverty of spirit? Is western evangelicalism
self-complacent? When we by God’s grace enjoy some small victory,
are we guilty of an ugly triumphalism? Have you detected any spiritual
meekness on most of the evangelical TV programmes which fill our
screens in North America, or do you find a preponderance of Madison
Avenue veneer?

But let me not point a finger only at large institutions, and visible,
organized religion. Let me rather address myself. Am I so satisfied with
my spiritual state that I feel no need to wait on my heavenly Father in
self-abasing prayer? Does my self-assessment before the glare of God’s
Word incite me to study the Scriptures more diligently, witness more
faithfully, praise more devoutly, obey more whole-heartedly, than ever
before? Or do I secretly think of myself as a remarkably spiritual chap,
certainly a cut or two above my peers?

(3) The threat, 3.16. ‘So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor
cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth’. Can this be true? Is
this the same Jesus of whom it is said that he loved the church and gave
himself for her?

Yes, this is the same Jesus. God has always revealed himself as God
of all justice as well as God of all mercy; and if judgment must begin, it
will begin with the house of God, with his own people. Here the exalted
Christ says that the Laodiceans’ “lukewarmness” is as nauseating to him
as the lukewarmness of the city water supply is to them. In non-meta-
phorical language, their self-sufficiency, their self-complacency, is simply
disgusting to him. How could it be otherwise? He is the one who
suffered for them, whose redemptive work effected the Father’s saving
purposes, who ‘fleshed out’ the very meaning of grace. Self-complacency
in the light of Calvary love is revolting, repulsive, nauseous. The church
which sinks to such depths will no longer find itself cherished and
nourished, but spat out from the Saviour’s mouth in disgust and revulsion.

(4) The remedy, 3.18f. The remedy comes in two parts. (a) First, the
Lord counsels the church to buy from him gold refined in the fire, white
clothes, the symbol of holiness without which no man shall see the
Lord. They shall not don the black overcoats of the local textile industry,
but more gold coin, but the gold that only Christ can give, the gold refined in
the fire, the gold of a regenerated spirit plunging onward to new lengths of
purity and sanctification. Here is true wealth, treasure laid up in heaven.
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wonderful things in the Scriptures, to see all of reality from the perspective of the divine throne-room, to adopt the far-seeing vision of the spiritual giants who endure because they see the invisible, and adopt the values of their exalted Lord. These are riches worth pursuing, the only riches worth pursuing.

(b) The second part of the remedy is this: ‘Be earnest, and repent’. The Laodicean believers were to repent of their self-complacency. Not only must one repent of sinful deeds; one must repent of sinful attitudes. To repent when one is self-compliant about holy things will engender earnestness. That is why, in the case of this particular sin, the command to be earnest and the command to repent are virtually one.

The Lord Jesus separates the two elements of the remedy by a quiet claim, the ultimate reason why that remedy is to be avidly pursued: ‘Those whom I love’, he says, ‘I rebuke and discipline’. Unbelievers he may pass over in silence until the day of judgment; but he who saves from sin can scarcely be silent when those whom he has saved return to wallow in sin. It is a mark of the Saviour’s love for his own that he rebukes them and punishes them, refusing to let them go too far. As a father disciplines the children he loves, so Christ Jesus, than whom no one loves more, disciplines his own people.

(5) Invitation to the church, and to Christians in the church, 3.20. The gross sin of the Laodicean church was its self-complacency, a form of self-reliance which felt no need for the presence of the Saviour. True repentance in their case will prompt them to long for him. Let all other riches vanish, but let him be present. And therefore he offers himself to them: ‘Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me.’

All of these seven letters in Revelation 2 and 3 were in the first instance sent to local churches [cf. 1.11]. Therefore this invitation in 3.20 is first of all designed to stir up the Laodicean church to prompt her to seek warm fellowship with her professed Lord. But the invitation goes beyond that. Commands to an entire church might escape the notice of the self-complacent individual; and in any case the individual believer is bound by covenant love to obey the commands of his Master regardless of what his local church does. For these twin reasons, Jesus goes on to individualize his invitation: ‘If anyone hears my voice . . .’ In fact, this individualizing is found in each of the seven letters, lest any Christian forget that each one is individually responsible for himself and also, as much as lies within him, for what the church is. One repeated line in these chapters confirms what I say: ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’. Reformation begins with me.

(6) Promise to overcomers, 3.21. ‘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’. What intrigues me most about this verse is that the Lord Jesus Christ himself calls obedient discipleship in an affluent society ‘overcoming’ Christianity. To overcome sometimes conjures up faithfulness under the pressure of persecution, heroic confessions as the torture pyres burn, exalted selflessness when everything material, and even health, are stripped away. But most of us in the western world are not called upon to ‘overcome’ in these ways; yet this does not mean we are exempt from the responsibility to ‘overcome’.

In what, then, does overcoming consist? Just this: we, like the Laodiceans, must fight victoriously against the temptation to let our world squeeze us into its mould. Our affluent society encourages self-reliance, self-complacency, triumphalism, and various forms of showy externalism. For the Christian to overcome in this setting may well take all the spiritual reserves which might be called up in a more openly antagonistic society.

To grow spiritually, to obey faithfully, to develop poverty of spirit, is to overcome in our settings. And it is the overcomers who share Christ’s reign in the new heaven and the new earth.

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