

Stern Love for a Sick Church

Rev 3:14-22

Intro: Imagine you came home after a night out and you were shocked to find a strange man sitting in your living room, eating leftovers from your fridge, sitting in your chair, drinking your beer, and watching your television. What if you said to him, "Excuse me? Can I help you?" And he smiled and said, "No, I think I'm all set. Thanks."

What's wrong with that picture? Just about everything. Here's a man who is so profoundly self-centered and self-oriented that he has no sense of his outrageous behavior. He's in your house, bought with your own hard-earned money, treating it like it was his own, built for his personal convenience and comfort.

In our text this morning we see that a church can make the same horrible mistake. A church can be so self-centered and self-oriented that it ends up on the couch, in God's house, happily acting as though the church exists for our purposes when the church is actually God's house, bought with the precious blood of Christ, and created for his gospel mission and his glory. The church in Laodicea was happy, comfortable, self-satisfied church – with their feet on the couch and no sense of how offensive they were to Christ.

Of all the 7 churches, the church in Laodicea receives the strongest rebuke. Jesus has nothing good to say about them. The church in Sardis was bad – but they at least had a few among them who had not soiled their garments. They were called to strengthen what remained – there was still a remnant of godliness in the church. Laodicea is just flat-out in sin. And it is the **nature** of their sin that is concerning and convicting.

I. The City

To understand this letter, we need to understand the city. Laodicea was the most prominent city of the three cities in the Lycus valley - the other two being Hierapolis, about 6 miles straight across the valley, and Colossae about 10 miles further down. Laodicea was known for its great wealth, its terrific medical college, its fine wool and its awful water.

The city had a robust economy as it was situated at a major crossroad of the two trade routes. It was a wealthy banking center. Jesus notes that they were rich. How rich was Laodicea? Well in 60 AD the city was devastated by an earthquake. Rome had its own version of FEMA and sent money to help rebuild the city. The citizens of Laodicea sent the money back saying, Thanks, but we don't need it. Laodiceans could take care of themselves. They were the epitome of self-sufficiency.

The city was also well known for a medical college which attracted the leading physicians and advanced medical techniques. One of the treatments for which it was well-known was a Phrygian eye-salve for treating blindness.

This was a capable, self-satisfied and self-reliant city. And the church was the same.

II. The Speaker (vs 14)

3:14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

"These are the words of the Amen". Joel Beeke points out that in the world of that day, contracts were often no more than verbal agreements. Your word was your pledge. And "Amen" was the verbal seal. Amen means – "so be it". Jesus is the "Amen of God" – the eternal pledge of God's promises and purposes. He is the final and full Word of God. God has no word for them beyond the word of Christ. It is essential that they listen to him.

"The faithful and true witness" - Sometimes you'll hear some person being praised because they "say it like it is", they speak the truth. No one ever spoke the truth as completely and perfectly as Jesus. Whenever Jesus speaks, he is not only correct in what he says, but every time he addresses a situation, he perfectly defines that situation. When we speak, we may speak truly but there is always more that could be said, or what we said could have been said better. When Jesus speaks there is nothing more to be said and it couldn't possibly have been said better.

"The beginning of God's creation". Paul speaks of this eloquently in Colossians 1.

Col 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. **16** For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. **17** He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

This Jesus is Lord and ruler of all. All authority in heaven and earth belongs to him. These are intensely important words for the church to hear.

III. The Sentence

"I know your deeds"

Voddie Baucham makes the point that this means that Jesus not only knows what you do – he knows why you do it. He knows everything there is to know about every word thought

and deed and every motive, blindness, or grace behind it. Jesus perfectly knows this church and he is about to share what he knows. It's harsh but it's true.

"You are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!"

It is common for people to interpret this as a reference to spiritual zeal. We identify "hot" with fervor and "cold" with apathy or deadness and it sounds like Jesus is saying, "be one or the other!"

But everyone who knew the city of Laodicea would immediately recognize this as a reference to their water. The one glaring problem with Laodicea was its putrid water. It was undrinkable and unusable. Which was unfortunate because the two other cities in the valley were known for their water – Colossae was known for its sparkling, cold mountain water. Hierapolis was known for its mineral hot springs – useful for relaxing and healing. So Laodicea piped cold mountain water from Colossae, 6 miles away and hot water from Hierapolis, about 11 miles away. Unfortunately, after meandering through miles of Roman aqueduct, by the time the waters reached Laodicea – the cold water was no longer cold and the hot water was no longer hot. It was all about the same – lukewarm. Unable to refresh and unable to bring healing.

Jesus is saying this: I wish you were hot and healing like the water of Hierapolis or cold and refreshing like the water of Colossae. But you are neither hot nor cold. In other words, as a church they were of no use to Christ. They are not bringing healing water to the sin-sick world around them, nor the cold refreshing water of the gospel to those thirsty for God. This is a spiritually useless church. They are of no benefit to Christ or his cause.

This is a devastating indictment. They are the fig tree that bore no fruit. (Luke 13:10)

The great ironic tragedy of Laodicea is that, not only are they spiritually useless - but they are spiritually clueless. They think everything is OK when it is profoundly not OK!

3:17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Consider the extent of their delusion. This is what they think is true:

"You say, I am rich, I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing."

The church had adopted the self-sufficient ethos of the city. They were wealthy. The ministries and programs of the church were well funded. It isn't hard to see why the believers in Laodicea thought they did not need a thing. If you were to ask this church "How can we pray for you?" they would say - "We really don't need anything. We're doing fine."

Have you ever had the experience where someone asks you; is there anything you'd like me to pray for you? – and you really couldn't think of anything? Everything was fine. Work was fine. Kids are fine. Marriage is fine. Everyone is healthy. Sure – there's a few things we wish were different – but all in all, we're doing fine. And so, you said, "Thanks, but, not really. Just a lot to be thankful for." I've been there. I've done that.

What's wrong with that picture? Think of what it says about how we think about life. It exposes an unspoken, un-questioned assumption and conviction that our life and thus our prayers are primarily for our needs and our well-being. If everything is going well with our immediate life – we don't feel a need to pray. There's really nothing to pray for. We need nothing. Our perspective is so thoroughly self-referential that if WE don't feel a personal want or lack, we don't sense any need to pray.

But what about God? What about his needs – His cause, his mission, his church, his world? What about his name? His glory? His kingdom? His will? Do you remember the prayer Jesus taught us? What are the needs, the petitions Jesus taught us to pray? "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your Name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." There is an order of priority here. Only AFTER we've prayed for the things that matter most – the name and mission of God, do we then pray for the things that matter to us – "give us this day our daily bread".

Jesus tells the church in Laodicea that they are blind – blind to what? Blind to spiritual reality. They were blind to their own desperate need – because they were blind to their calling. They were blind to a lost and dying world all around them. Blind to the glory of Christ and their desperate need for Him. One of the greatest spiritual dangers for a church is this incredible self-referential shrinking of our vision to our needs, our desires, our wants – so that we simply don't see what God desires and what God wants.

A self-oriented, self-satisfied church is offensive to Christ – and to the watching world.

Joel Beeke, "Nothing dishonors Christ more in the eyes of the world than a self-satisfied church. Such a congregation preaches the gospel of grace to needy sinners but lives as if it has no spiritual needs itself. It tells people that they are guilty sinners but acts as if it has no guilt of its own for Christ's blood to cover. A self-satisfied church is a living contradiction to the gospel of Christ." (163)

Their wealth and material self-sufficiency made them think that everything was fine. But everything was NOT fine. This is a church in terrible straights. *And they don't even know it.*

What are the signs of this kind of delusion? It seems clear that the one defining mark of this deadly delusion is simply this - there is no sense of desperate need. When a burn victim feels no pain they are in the very worst position, for the burn has gone so deep it has killed even the nerves. When a church experiences no sense of need it is in dire straits. It's taken its eyes off the calling, off the mission – and has settled for a comfortable life of self-orientation and self-reliance.

How can you tell if a church is gripped by the gospel mission? They will pray. They will sense their profound need for help and power and they will pray! (Acts 4)

What Jesus finds repugnant is the church's superficial complacency, and self-sufficient existence. They are useless and clueless. They sense no need for the power of God or the presence of Christ. And therefore they are about to be spewed out.

"So, because you are lukewarm- neither hot nor cold - I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

Judgment is hanging over this church. But, praise God – this is not the final word!

3:18 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.

IV. The Salvation

A. "I counsel you" - Notice the tender love in these words. Jesus has spoken harshly to them to shock them out of their deadly complacency. But his rebuke is grace.

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

Jesus is loving this church well. He loves US **well** when he reproves us!

B. "Buy from **me**" –

Everything they need they lack.

Everything they need Jesus, and Jesus alone, is able to supply.

1. **Buy gold refined in the fire** - in other words, buy from me riches are real and eternal.
2. **"White clothes to wear so you can cover your shameful nakedness."** Without Jesus we are simply naked and wretched before the sight of God. We have nothing with which to cover our sin, nothing to wash away our filth.

What are you wearing before the Living God this morning? It is the height of folly to stand before God clothed in nothing but the filth of your own righteousness and the

scattered remnants of your good intentions. Jesus lovingly calls you to go *to him* for your spiritual clothing. No matter how great your sin, no matter how shameful your nakedness, Jesus invites you to come and be clothed in his perfect righteousness. He offers all his obedience to cover all your sin.

3. ***“Buy salve to put on your eyes.”*** Only Jesus can give us eyes to see. – to see the glory of God, to see the truth of our sin, to see the sufficiency of Christ and to see the path of faith and obedience that he calls us to walk.

Jesus counsels his church - come and buy from me all the things you really need. But how can this church buy anything? They are poor and pitiful. This is the great news of the gospel. God only sells to those who cannot buy.

Isaiah 55:1 *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*

The gospel is precisely for those who have nothing to offer but their need. And that’s where we are today. We have nothing of merit to offer, and we never will. We will always need the gospel. We will always need grace. We will always be poor, pitiful, blind and naked without Jesus. And we will always find all we need when we come to him.

Notice the amazing promise he gives to them – and to us.

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 eat with him, and he with me.* ²¹ *The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.*

What is Jesus telling them – and us?

He’s right here – I stand at the door and knock. He isn’t far away. He’s right here. And he’s speaking right now. “If anyone hears my voice” – no matter who you are or what you’ve done – if you hear Jesus’ voice, if you see your guilt and confess your need and trust His provision Jesus says “I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.” In the gospel, Jesus doesn’t simply offer us salvation – He offers us Himself. What we get by faith in Christ is all that we lost in our fall with Adam – communion and fellowship and peace and intimacy with God in Christ Jesus. That’s what eating signifies.

And that’s what we have signified in the Table of the Lord this morning. Intimacy, fellowship, communion with Jesus.