

What Christ Expects of His Church

VIII. The Letter to Laodicea: Submission

Revelation 3: 14-22

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What does Jesus Christ expect of his church, the people who claim and bear his name? This has been our quest as we have reflected together on the letters to the seven churches of Asia found in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation. As you may recall from our introduction while John is exiled on the island of Patmos, he has this vision of the risen Christ who directs him to write these letters to the selected churches. Written in apocalyptic language they contain hints and clues as to how faithful disciples were to live then and now in the face of conflict and trial. And what we have learned thus far is that among other things, Jesus expects Christians to love fervently (Ephesus), to suffer courageously if necessary (Smyrna), to be a people committed to the truth (Pergamum), and to be a community marked by holiness (Thyatira), by vitality and vigilance (Sardis), in our most recent to the letter to Philadelphia we learned that Jesus also expects his disciples to be trustworthy, to be servants he can count on as agents of salvation and service.

As I told you, Jesus' praise for the church in Philadelphia was effusive. There is no condemnation, no judgment, no warnings --- just praise and promises for this faithful, persevering and trustworthy band of followers. I later read after preaching on the letter to Philadelphia that of all the seven cities, the city of Philadelphia now called *Alasehir* has the strongest Christian church in what is now Turkey, where Islam predominates. Maybe this shouldn't be too surprising given the character of this exemplary church in the first century.

At any rate, while it may have been preferable or desirable to end our study of these Asian churches with the upbeat message to Philadelphia, we come at last to the letter to the church of Laodicea which is the sternest and the most disturbing of all, or so it seems to me. Then again maybe it is providential that we conclude with Laodicea. Not unlike children, some Christians and some congregations respond better to harsh words of admonition and others to encouraging words of praise and affirmation. Two of our own children are polar opposites in this regard and what motivates one to change or obey flies right over the head of the other.

Now all of this is to say that while I am not overly fond of this letter to Laodicea it may well be a message we need to hear. Indeed, all of us some of the time and seemingly some of us

all of the time need the blunt and offensive words of Jesus to be reminded of how we are disappointing our Savior and failing to live up to his expectations for his church.

There is certainly reason to take offense at this letter and surely some within the church of Laodicea did so. This letter offers nothing but condemnation and criticism and in language that is unusually harsh and caustic, and much more so than we can even imagine. Our English translations of this text attempt to dignify the language and soften the blow, not with politically correct speech, but with ecclesiastically correct speech. Eugene Peterson's contemporary paraphrase, *The Message*, really gets at the tone of the original letter when he renders verses 15-18 in this way: *"I know you inside and out, and find little to my liking. You're not cold, you're not hot --- far better to be either cold or hot! You're stale. You're stagnant. You make me want to vomit. You brag, 'I'm rich, I've got it made, I need nothing from anyone,' oblivious that in fact you're a pitiful, blind beggar, threadbare and homeless."*

Why such blunt words? What was it about the church of Laodicea that so disappointed, angered and even nauseated our Lord? Why is it that this church has seemingly no redeeming, or at least redeemed feature?

To begin with this was a city and a church with great wealth and prominence. Well-situated geographically for commercial and business interests, Laodicea was a city of political, financial, and commercial significance. So wealthy was this community that when it experienced an equally devastating earthquake, much like Sardis and Philadelphia, it neither asked for nor received any aid from the Roman government. After all, its resources were sufficient and abundant. The prosperous lifestyle of its citizens was the envy of the region.

But God's view of wealth and man's view are radically different. And so, while the Laodiceans considered themselves wealthy and enviable, the risen Christ obviously regards them as the wretched and pitiable poor. Many a person with cash in the bank and an impressive portfolio is in fact spiritually poverty-stricken.

So here was a people, and yes, a church that basked in its own self-sufficiency and independence. Given their presumed wealth, they had no need of any one or any thing. And thus, their false sense of pride and affluence was blinding them from seeing their own poverty and need.

Verse 18 mentions a salve they used to anoint their eyes. One of the distinguishing features of Laodicea was that there was a powder produced nearby that was famous for its curative powers and was well known in the ancient world. Aristotle even refers to it in his writings and speaks of its curative powers. So, of all people the Laodiceans thought that they could see

themselves with clarity and accuracy, but in truth they were blind to their own pathetic and pitiable condition spiritually.

The Laodiceans also prided themselves on being well-clothed, no doubt, because Laodicea had a thriving woolen and linen business. The garment trade flourished there and the woolen and linen clothes from this city were luxurious and famous over the known world. Any yet, Jesus says that though they cannot see it, they are actually naked and shamefully exposed to all who could really and truly see. “The King has on no clothes,” we might say. Jesus is suggesting that the Laodiceans have no clothes on.

I’m not sure that we in the West can fully appreciate the shame and humiliation of this notion of being stripped naked before others. In the Middle East in both ancient and modern times nothing is more degrading than to stand naked before others, especially before those of the opposite sex. And so, both women and men in this culture cover so much of their body, not out of shame but out of respect for the flesh. And quite frankly, that is one reason why the atrocities by our own military at the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq a few years ago were so unconscionable and inhumane and far beneath the principles of this country. Male prisoners were stripped naked and paraded before young female officers who mocked and demeaned them and forced them to do despicable things.

So, the Laodiceans see themselves as the enviable rich. Jesus sees them as the pitiable poor. They see themselves as finely clothed. Jesus sees them as shamefully naked.

Jesus’ diagnosis of the Laodicean church is radically at odds with the Laodiceans’ vision of themselves.

And so, it is that Jesus delivers his sternest condemnation yet. He calls this church to earnest repentance. About the only good thing is this church’s favor, which has absolutely nothing to do with its own merit, is that the Lord continued to love these poor, blind, wretched, and naked disciples. If he didn’t love them so, as he confesses, he would not bother with reproving them or disciplining them. And so, they experience what William Barclay refers to as “love’s chastisement.”

The chief complaint against the church of Laodicea, and one that ought to cause this or any other church to sit up and take notice, is that here was a church that was clearly indifferent about the things of God. Would that they were either hot or cold, he says, but because they are neither, they make him nauseous. Apparently, lethargy, apathy, and indifference are more of an offence to the risen Lord than outright opposition. That is what these verses suggest to me.

I know as a minister I have felt the same thing on occasion, and I suspect that many of you have as well. This much I can tell you, I can deal far better with someone who does not believe at all, or who does not know if he or she believes, than with someone who claims to believe but does absolutely nothing about it. I have said to you before that the one thing Jesus Christ cannot be is moderately important. Jesus is either all important or unimportant, but never marginally important.

If Jesus is “King of kings and Lord of lords” which is what John will declare in Chapter 19 and which Handel put to music in the Messiah, then we dare not insult this king by honoring him when we feel like it, or obeying him when it happens to suit our time and purposes.

All Christians in every age, regardless of the congregation they are a part of, must decide if Jesus is really King, if he truly is Lord, and whether or not they will submit to his rule in every area of their lives. Too many Christians in the first century and in the twenty-first century call Jesus King, even claim him as King and Lord, but refuse to submit to his rule in every area of their life --- their politics, their social life, their vocational life, their financial life, their family life, their intellectual life, even their church life.

The Christian church in America as you must know is in decline, just as is the Presbyterian Church. In recent years the percentage of Americans who claim to be Christians has dropped sharply. One of the groups growing most rapidly among us and now even outnumber Presbyterians are Muslims. Why is this so? I cannot help but think it has something to do with the fact that Islam means “submission” and many Muslims are far more committed to and submitted to Allah and his prophet, Mohamed, than are Christians to the King we call Jesus.

These letters to the seven churches have not been easy ones to hear or to heed. Preparing these messages has been stimulating but also disturbing in many ways. At times I have felt God’s pleasure and on other occasions I feel his warnings are directed to me and to you. You may not like what I’m about to say but in many ways it seems we, in this congregation, have more in common with the church of Laodicea than we do with any of the others. The Christians of Laodicea, wealthy, prosperous, envied by others and dressed in the latest fashions could come in and take a seat in these pews and feel right at home. But what does God see when he looks on you and me and our church? Since he knows us well, as he does all of the churches, what would be his assessment of our submission to his reign?

I agree with John Stott in his assessment of this Laodicean letter when he writes as follows:

Perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to the church at the beginning of the 21st century than this. It describes vividly the respectable, nominal, rather sentimental,

skin-deep religiosity which is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity is flabby and anemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion.

May I say a personal word with you this morning. As some of you well know I have shared with you over the past year and a half as your transitional pastor my concerns over some of the trends in this church that suggest mediocrity, lethargy, and apathy within this grand old church. Last fall in our “Revival” and revitalization efforts in preparation for new pastoral leadership which should soon be arriving we challenged the membership to take your discipleship more seriously --- to recommit yourselves to more faithful attendance at worship, to more engagement personally in study and personal spiritual growth, to make personal sharing in the church’s fellowship opportunities a priority and to be more disciplined and generous in your financial support of the church.

We were beginning to see some growth in these areas but then the Covid-19 crisis dealt a body blow to these efforts, so the final results are not in. But I wonder where we will be spiritually when the pandemic ends, and new leadership arrives. If your new pastor is to lead you into a new era of faithful and effective service into a new season of vital growth personally and corporately then he or she will be dependent on a renewed commitment to the promises each of you made when you joined this church. No doubt, you will be blessed with a wonderful new pastor and with an excellent and energetic continuing staff to work alongside him or her. But without your passionate and faithful presence and participation the best days of this church will remain in the past and apathy, lethargy and mediocrity will again undermine the work of Christ’s church and the Lord’s expectation of us.

Now why would I as an Interim or Transitional Pastor want to give you this rather blunt and possibly disturbing assessment. One reason is because I am expected to do this and I can say what I believe and be gone and not deal with any fallout that might face your new pastor if delivered the same message. It’s also my job.

But I am compelled for another reason as well. I don’t want to follow me the footsteps of Archippus. If you open the closing verses of Colossians (in your Bibles) Paul sends greetings to Christian brothers and sisters in Laodicea. He mentions a letter to the Laodiceans that he has written but has not survived the ages. And the he writes in verse 17, say to Archippus: “See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.” A third century work entitled *The Apostolic Constitutions* identifies this Archippus as the first Bishop of the church of Laodicea. Somehow, he had failed to complete his ministry and may well have tempered his speech and backed off from telling this lukewarm church what it needed to hear.

So while you may not want to hear my comparison of the church in Greensboro to the church of Laodicea, and while you may rightly disagree with my assessment, I know that some

day I like Bishop Archippus will have to give an accounting of my ministry to this and other churches. And I don't want the Lord to hold me accountable for glossing over the truth or having said only what was pleasing and popular at the expense of the truth.

In conclusion, the best news for the Laodiceans and for us is that the risen and reigning Lord still loves us and longs to enter in and take control of our individual lives and our church. He invites and welcomes our submission and our service. So he stands at the door and knocks and if we let him in and welcome him he will take charge and in the process bless us and use us to be a blessing to others.