

[Revelation 3:14–22](#)

The Letter to the Church at Laodicea

The courier who had been entrusted by the apostle John with the seven letters to the seven churches neared his journey's end. Having embarked from the island of Patmos with the book of Revelation securely tucked away in his messenger's pouch, he would have begun his travel along the circular route by first visiting Ephesus. Moving northward he would pass through the cities of Smyrna and Pergamum, at which point, turning southeast, his journey would lead him to Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia. Finally, having come almost full circle along the well-beaten trade route, he would arrive at his final destination: Laodicea.

As he no doubt tarried in each of the cities long enough to hear the public reading of the respective letters, his understanding of the nature and practice of the local church surely blossomed. *Ephesus*: so zealous for theological purity and yet growing coldly indifferent to one another. *Smyrna*: wracked with poverty as a result of persecution and suffering, yet standing firm. *Pergamum*: so full of love and compassion but in danger of theological and moral compromise. *Thyatira*: the epitome of growth and development but overly tolerant of false teaching. *Sardis*: known throughout the world for life and love, but in reality spiritual putrefaction was rampant. And *Philadelphia*: so small, so seemingly insignificant, yet so diligent and patient in the face of a hostile world. He must have thought he had seen it all ... *until he came to Laodicea!*

Laodicea was a wealthy city, perhaps the wealthiest in all of Phrygia. It was so wealthy that following a devastating earthquake in 60 a.d. the city rebuilt itself without financial aid from Rome. In the Annals ([xiv.27](#)) Tacitus wrote: "Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us." It was a city known not simply for its monetary success (it was a banking center) but for its linen and wool industry (especially black sheep!) as well as its medical school. Probably the most famous medicinal product to come out of Laodicea was an eye ointment made from a power produced in Phrygia.

Self-confident, self-sufficient, seemingly well-endowed ... to such a church which considered itself rich, our Lord says "Buy from me gold ... that you may

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become rich" (v. [18](#)); to such a church which took pride in its textile industry, our Lord says "Buy from me ... white garments that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed" (v. [18](#)); to such a church which boasted of its contribution to ophthalmic medicine our Lord says "Buy from me ... eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see" (v. [18](#)). The severity of this letter is unmistakable, as is also the absence of a single word of praise or commendation. "Even in the nearly dead church at Sardis there was a faithful remnant, but no such remnant is clearly discernible in the Laodicean church" (Beale, [302](#)).

We don't know how or when the gospel came to Laodicea. Paul most likely never visited the church and thus it seems probable that Epaphras, servant of the Lord in Colossae, initiated the work there. [Colossians 4:12-16](#) indicates that Paul wrote a letter to the congregation at Laodicea, a letter now lost to us (Laodicea is mentioned five times in the letter to the [Colossians: 2:1; 4:13, 15, 16](#)(2)). Beyond this we know little of its history.

Vv. [14-17](#)

This is the only instance in the seven letters where the description of Jesus is not taken from the visionary portrait of [chp. 1](#). In describing himself as "The Amen" Jesus is probably alluding to [Isa. 65:16](#), the only time this title is used of God.

Our Lord discerns two things in Laodicea: (1) moral and religious tepidity or lukewarmness (vv. [15-16](#)), and prideful self-sufficiency (v. [17](#)).

(1) *Moral and religious tepidity* (vv. [15-16](#))

In sum, the Christianity at Laodicea was flabby and anemic! What is the significance of the terminology of *cold*, *hot*, and *lukewarm*?

Often people think that by "hot" Jesus is referring to zealous, lively, hard-working Christians, and that by "cold" he is referring to lifeless pagans. *Hot*, so goes the argument, refers to spiritually active believers whereas *cold* refers to apathetic pagans. But this creates a problem: how can Jesus prefer the indifferent pagan to the backslidden, lukewarm Christian? Granted, the latter is bad, but is it really the case that Jesus would prefer his lukewarm people to be in blatant unbelief? This seems highly unlikely.

An understanding of certain features of the topography of the land may go a long way in helping make sense of Jesus' imagery.

It is important to be aware of the fact that Laodicea was only six miles south of Hierapolis and eleven miles west of Colossae. These three cities

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were the most important of all in the Lycus Valley. Laodicea itself lacked a natural water supply and was dependent on its neighbors for this vital resource.

It is now believed that “hot” and “cold” don’t refer to the spiritual “temperature”, as it were, of the believer and the unbeliever, but to the “hot” medicinal waters of Hierapolis on the one hand (whose “hot springs” reached 95 degrees), and the “cold” refreshing waters of Colossae on the other. If this is what Jesus had in mind, “the church is not being called to task for its spiritual temperature but for the *barrenness* of its works” (Mounce, 125–26). The church was providing neither *refreshment* for the spiritually weary (portrayed through the imagery of “cold” water from Colossae), nor *healing* for the spiritually sick (portrayed through the imagery of “hot” water from Hierapolis). The church was simply ineffective and thus distasteful to the Lord. This relieves the problem of why Christ would prefer the church to be “cold” rather than “lukewarm”. The church in Laodicea is rebuked, therefore, for the *useless and barren nature of its works, indicative of its stagnant spiritual condition*.

In the word “lukewarm” there is probably another allusion to the hot springs of Hierapolis, located just 6 miles north of Laodicea. As the hot, mineral-laden waters traveled across the plateau towards Laodicea, they gradually became lukewarm before cascading over the edge directly in view of the Laodicean populace. There are actually archaeological remains in Laodicea of an aqueduct system that would have carried water from Hierapolis. They could hardly forget this lukewarm water which would make one sick if drunk. “**That** is what you are like to Me,” says Jesus. The imagery is graphic! Be it noted, however, that this “spewing” out of Christ’s mouth is not necessarily an unalterable decree of judgment, but rather a threat of divine discipline which may be abated through repentance and obedience (cf. v. [19](#)).

(2) *Prideful, self-sufficiency* (v. [17](#))

Their spiritual barrenness was probably the rotten fruit of a prideful self-sufficient attitude. Ladd explains:

“The church boasted that it was healthy and prosperous. The Greek of this verse literally rendered is, ‘I am rich and I have gotten riches.’ Not only did the church boast in her supposed spiritual well-being; she boasted that she had acquired her wealth by her own efforts. Spiritual complacency was accompanied by spiritual pride. No doubt part of her problem was the inability to distinguish between material and spiritual prosperity. The church that is prosperous materially and outwardly can

easily fall into the self-deception that her outward prosperity is the measure of her spiritual prosperity.... [The church] is in reality like a blind beggar, destitute, clad in rags" ([66](#)).

There seems to be a deliberate contrast drawn between Smyrna and Laodicea. Smyrna suffered from material poverty (*ptocheia*) but was regarded by Jesus as spiritually wealthy (*plousios*). Laodicea, on the other hand, was materially wealthy (*plousios*) but spiritually poor (*ptocheia*). Thus, ***despite their banks, they were beggars! Despite their famous eye-salve, they were blind! Despite their prosperous clothing factories, they were naked!***

Vv. [18-20](#)

Continuing to use imagery derived from their own commercial activities (and it *is* but imagery or figurative language, so don't press the concept of "buying" things from Jesus too far!), he counsels them to make several purchases in those areas where they fancy themselves self-sufficient. Jesus likens himself to a merchant who visits the city to sell his wares and competes with other salesmen. "I advise you," he says, "to forsake your former suppliers and come trade with me."

"**Gold**" = Spiritual wealth, often the result of refining by the fires of suffering (cf. [Job 23:10](#); [Prov. 27:21](#); [Mal. 3:2-3](#); [1 Pt. 1:6-9](#)). By the way, there is obvious paradox here, for how can "poor" people purchase a commodity as expensive as gold? Cf. [Isa. 55:1-2](#).

"**White garments**" = Works of righteousness which were so lacking in Laodicea ("uncovering the shame of nakedness" is "language often used in the OT when God accused Israel of participation in idolatry: see [Isa. 43:3](#); [Ezek. 16:36](#); [23:29](#); [Nahum 3:5](#)). One can hardly miss the contrast no doubt intended here between the famous and profitable "black" wool from the sheep in Laodicea and the "white" woolen garments essential to their spiritual lives.

"**Eyesalve**" = restoration of their spiritual vision. The founder of the medical school at Laodicea was a famous ophthalmologist named Demosthenes Philalethes.

Stott's words are to the point:

"Here is welcome news for naked, blind beggars! They are poor; but Christ has gold. They are naked; but Christ has clothes. They are blind; but Christ has eyesalve. Let them no longer trust in their banks, their Phrygian eyepowders and their clothing factories. Let them come to Him! He can enrich their poverty, clothe their nakedness and heal their blindness. He can open their eyes to perceive a spiritual world of which

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they have never dreamed. He can cover their sin and shame and make them fit to partake of the inheritance of the saints in light. He can enrich them with life and life abundant" (122–23).

The appeal which follows in vv. [19–20](#) has been the subject of considerable debate. Here are the options.

(1) The *salvation* view—According to one interpretation, this appeal is addressed to *unbelievers*. The door at which Christ stands is the door to one's heart or life. The knocking and voice of Christ are heard through the preaching of the gospel. The opening of the door is the decision of the will to invite Christ into one's heart or life. The result is that in conversion Christ enters the person to take up permanent residence.

(2) The *fellowship* view—According to this view, the invitation is addressed to *backslidden, unrepentant believers* who, in their self-sufficiency, had excluded (indeed, excommunicated) the risen Lord from their congregational and personal lives. But "in an act of unbelievable condescension he [Jesus] requests permission to enter and re-establish fellowship" (129), a fellowship portrayed in the imagery of a feast in which Christ and his people share.

Of special importance is the possible allusion in this passage to [Song of Solomon 5:2](#) ..., which if intentional, would lend support to the possibility of a typological/figurative interpretation of the book.

(3) The *eschatological* view—This interpretation says that the invitation (v. [20](#)) has a *future* fulfillment. It is addressed to backslidden believers in the church at Laodicea and pertains to Christ's second coming. The door at which Jesus stands is a metaphor for the imminence of his return (cf. [James 5:9](#)). Those who are prepared and alert to receive their Savior at his coming will enjoy intimate communion with him in the messianic feast of the age to come. This view links v. [20](#) with v. [21](#) and the promise of co-regency in the future kingdom.

The salvation view strikes me as highly unlikely. According to v. [19](#), Jesus is addressing the children of God who, as children, are recipients of divine, loving discipline. Jesus has in view the corporate discipline of the church, similar to what we saw in [2:5](#) with regard to the church at Ephesus. Also, v. [19](#) is an obvious allusion to [Prov. 3:11–12](#) and [Hebrews 12:5–6](#), both of which have in view the children of God. We should also note the connection between v. [19](#) and v. [20](#). V. [20](#) is a description of what repentance is and what follows upon it, namely, a restoration of intimate communion between Jesus and the believer. We also must acknowledge the obvious reference to the messianic kingdom feast. In this regard, see [Luke 12:35–39](#); [22:28–30](#). Added to this is the fact that the sharing of table fellowship was a common image in those

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days for deep communion and the strong bonds of affection and companionship.

Whereas some see in the “feast” and the imagery of “dining” a reference to the Lord’s Supper, I find this unlikely. The picture here is one in which Jesus himself dines personally with the individual, whereas in the Eucharist it is we all, corporately, who share a meal in remembrance of the sacrifice of Christ.

Thus the appeal of v. [20](#) is not to unbelievers so that they might be saved. Rather it is an appeal to individuals (“anyone”) within the church to repent and forsake their spiritual half-heartedness. As a result one may experience *now* the intimate communion and fellowship of which the feast in the messianic kingdom is the *consummation*. All present fellowship with Jesus is a foretaste of that eternal felicity which will be consummated in the age to come.

It is also interesting to note that Laodicea was situated foursquare on one of the most important road junctions in Asia Minor. Each of the four city gates opened on to a busy trade route. “The inhabitants,” observes Hemer, “must have been very familiar with the belated traveler who ‘stood at the door and knocked’ for admission” ([204](#)).

Vv. [21-22](#)

For “reigning” with Christ, see [Rev. 1:6](#); [5:10](#); [20:4, 6](#); [22:5](#).