

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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To the Church in Laodicea – Joss Bray

Laodicea is the last of the seven churches in Asia that is mentioned at the beginning of the book of Revelation.

It was mentioned in Paul's letter to the Colossians as well – specifically the church that met in Nympha's house. It is located a few miles from Colossae in Turkey and the ruins still look pretty impressive.

Laodicea was a rich town with a notable aqueduct system, supplying the water for the city and several temples, a gymnasium, baths and a big stadium. In fact, when it was totally destroyed in an earthquake in around AD 60, it refused help from the roman emperor and was rebuilt just with the resources they had – which must have been considerable.

So what did Jesus have to say to the church there?

REV 3:14 "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. ¹⁵ I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. ²⁰ 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. 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. ²² He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Jesus introduces himself

Jesus starts off in different ways to the different churches in these messages. Right at the start he says in effect – right – I am the one with the last word – the “amen” – literally “so be it”. Jesus says “I tell the truth and you can trust me in this”. And then – “I am in charge of everything that has been created – so you had definitely better listen!”

That is the Jesus we worship and love and follow. He is the “amen” to our lives individually and as a body. He has the final say, the last word. He is in charge. So now he has got their attention.

But then - oh dear!

This is the only church that Jesus didn’t commend for anything whatsoever. Nothing at all. There were not even any works that they did that they could be encouraged about – unlike the other churches. They did works but they were literally useless!

Why did Jesus use the picture of lukewarm water to illustrate this? – Well interestingly, the Laodiceans would have probably understood this straight away. The aqueduct and pipe system that brought their water originated in hot springs in the hills several miles away. By the time it got to them, it would have indeed been lukewarm.

However, in two nearby cities, Hierapolis and Colossae things were different. Hierapolis was the site of hot, spa-like waters, used for medicinal purposes. Nearby Colossae was known for its cold and pure drinking water.

Lukewarm water was not useful – drinking it was not pleasant – far better to have nice cold water – and it would certainly not be as good or as effective as a nice hot bath.

Lukewarm temperatures are what bacteria like best to grow in. They can’t reproduce in the cold – hence fridges are cold – and they get killed with the heat – hence cooking is hot.

So lukewarm is useless, unpleasant and likely to be a breeding ground for things that are toxic and unhelpful. In fact, Jesus was going to spit them out of his mouth – just as people did with the lukewarm water in Laodicea.

No wonder Jesus wished they were either hot or cold – which would have been actually useful. Note that from this, we can see that it doesn’t seem to be about the “spiritual temperature” of the church as we might think - since Jesus would have been ok with hot or cold – it was about the fact that the church had become of no use to him. That was the crucial issue.

So why were they useless?

Jesus is clear – the church there had decided that their riches consisted of earthly wealth that they had acquired. They then concluded that they didn't need anything else. They were “perfectly comfortable thank you” and in effect said they didn't need God and would not be relying on him because they had all they needed. This was a huge mistake. It had made them of no use at all in the kingdom of God – like lukewarm water.

This same lukewarmness had allowed this toxic attitude to grow and it had poisoned the church so Jesus was going to spit it out – as you would.

They were more than useless

They were actually wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. And they didn't realise it. That is extremely sad and is a huge wake up call. Everything they thought they had was meaningless in terms of the kingdom of God. It had no lasting worth and they had no treasure in heaven.

There is a way out

Jesus had the answer that would transform them. It wasn't that they should try harder, do more things as a church or even pray more. No – it was to come to Jesus and get heavenly riches. Refined gold – a faith that is tried and tested which itself a gift from God. White clothes – signifying sins washed way, being clean and lives put right with God and being able to stand in his presence without shame. Healing for their spiritual eyes so they may really see what is important and what they actually needed.

Remember in Isaiah 55 it says:

ISA 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. ISA 55:2 Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

Jesus is echoing these prophetic words. Come and buy – and it doesn't even cost you – because Jesus has already paid the full price. It is like going to a shop and filling your trolley – getting to the checkout and being waved through because someone has

already paid in full. What is more, the trolley is full of top quality blessings and food for our soul. Enough to fill us and satisfy us and help us grow. Too good to be true? No – that is the outrageous grace of God poured out to us – over and over again – and many of us can testify to that.

Jesus still loved the church

Even though this is a very hard message to the Laodiceans, notice that he says “those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline”. Like a good parent who wants the best for their child, Jesus reveals the father heart of God wanting the best for the church. His requirement is this – that they take this rebuke and discipline seriously and turn away from the way that they have fallen into. To turn around and receive good and perfect gifts from him and to count themselves rich in spiritual things rather than worldly things.

Indeed he is knocking on their door – and waiting for them to let him in. He will not force himself on them. He is waiting for them to open up the door of their lives to him. They know his voice already – they have just kept him outside their lives. He wants to come and just be with them – the picture of eating together is intimate and healing and loving. Imagine the joy and peace of that meal!

The promise

There is always a promise at the end of these messages to the churches. Here it is not a picture of the chastened people of the Laodicea church being let in to the heavenly realm by a back door and sitting on the naughty step. To the contrary - those who are obedient, repent and persevere will get to sit with Jesus on his throne – for eternity – in an honoured place surrounded by angels worshipping God and amazing and beautiful things happening, with joy forever and no more crying or pain.

God does not bear grudges – once he forgives he counts it dealt with. Jesus has done all that is needed by paying the price on the cross – that's it – finished – not to be remembered again – ever.

What does the spirit say to the churches?

I am sure that God will have been speaking to us as we have been looking at this last message.

- We may have thought – are we lukewarm and useless?
- Have we trusted too much for our security in the things of the world?
- Have we relied enough on Jesus and are we rich in heavenly things more than earthly things?
- Can we see ourselves as Jesus sees us?
- Are we ready to hear from him when he rebukes and disciplines us
- And will we open the door to him and let him in to be truly Lord of our lives?

These are big questions to think about. How about taking time this week to look again at the message to the church in Laodicea and responding to the prompting of the Holy Spirit as we reflect on the word of God?

And if we think we are doing reasonably well – then how do we not become lukewarm and useless in the future?

The answer to that one is of course all about Jesus:

JN 7:37 On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. ³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

And that has got to be good hasn't it?

So let us go to Jesus, let's drink in his love and forgiveness, his Holy Spirit, the joy of being a child of the King. Let's hear what he says through his word and through prophesy and all the gifts of the spirit and through each other. Let's spend time with him and open the door of our lives to him. Lets not rely on any other source of nourishment or satisfaction or security or power – they are all transient and count for nothing in the end.

The promises to all the churches in Revelation stand for us today and for all eternity and Jesus wants us to know that right now.