

STUDY 7 – THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN LAODICEA (3:14-22)

The final letter in Revelation 3 is the most challenging, and in some ways the most relevant to churches in the affluent west in the 21st century. We may not be facing overt persecution but the temptations to complacency and lethargy are very real.

As a city Laodicea was very rich. It was a commercial centre – three roads met there so it was a natural place for trade to pass through. It was famous for its banks, its clothes (they took black wool from sheep to make very impressive garments), and for its medical school where there was an early eye hospital. It was also infamous for the fact that the water there was terrible – it was lukewarm and tasted of lime and lead. This was because in some of the towns nearby there were hot and cold springs, so by the time the water travelled underground from there it had lost either its refreshing coolness or its searing heat. Jesus picks up on some of these characteristics of the place in his letter.

Jesus begins by reminding the church who he is. In particular, he draws attention to his honesty. He is the “Amen”, the one who is the “faithful and true witness” – particularly to his Father (a key theme of John’s gospel). He is reliable, and he is “the ruler of God’s creation”. The word “ruler” also means “master” and “origin”. He is the King and the creator. All these things show that we must listen to Jesus and that his words have authority. More than that though, Jesus may be describing himself in this way here because he is about to tell this church that they have forgotten who they are – they’ve stopped being a true witness of their Saviour who is now outside his church. The root of their problem is that they have forgotten who he is.

Jesus knows the Laodiceans’ “deeds”. Verses 15 and 16 does not mean that Jesus would rather they were completely against him (cold) than merely apathetic (lukewarm). He uses the illustration of lukewarm water which is not pleasing to drink. They have stopped being useful (which they would be if, in the illustration, they were water that was cold or hot). They are no longer who they are meant to be. This is serious. Verse 16 suggests that, like the church in Sardis, Jesus is about to judge this church.

Verse 17 tells us the reason why the church is like this. They are proud and complacent. They feel all they have they have earnt. This may be literal riches – as we have seen Laodicea was a wealthy city. It may be their opinion on the spiritual riches they have. More likely, one has fed into the other. Great wealth and achievements can lead us to start believing we have earnt our spiritual health.

However Jesus makes very clear that they are suffering from deliberate spiritual amnesia. This church does not realise they are “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked”. This is the condition of all of us before Christ, left to ourselves. We have nothing to bring him other than our sin. We have nothing to expect from him other than judgement. The great tragedy is that this is a church that has forgotten these truths – if they ever truly realised it in the first place.

The good news of the gospel is that though we are “wretched....and naked” Jesus Christ clothes us with his righteousness and has dealt with our sin. That is what he calls on this church to do in verse 18. He calls them to get true riches – although he says “buy from me”, he has already said they have nothing so this can’t meant they can purchase them! It is the kind of “buying” those who have no money are called to do in Isaiah 55:1. He calls them to buy white clothes to cover their sin that has been exposed by him, and eye salve so they can see themselves and their need and their Saviour truly. Summing up verse 18 we could say that Jesus is calling this church to come to him and to truly know him. In him are all the riches the church has or needs. In him we are righteous. In him we see God and ourselves clearly.

This seems like a harsh letter, but Jesus reminds us why he speaks like this in verse 19. He loves his church. He loves the Laodiceans. He loves us. He disciplines us so we come to him and know him truly. It would be far worse to let a church like this carry on as they are and never return to him.

Verse 20 is often used as a text to quote at the end of evangelistic sermons, and there is a very famous Holman Hunt painting which shows Christ at the door of the human heart knocking, looking forlorn while waiting to be invited in (because the door handle is on the inside – only we can open it). This is to

take this text out of context. In reality, it sums up the serious situation of the Laodiceans. Jesus Christ is outside his church – that’s the shock (it’s not a verse addressing those who do not profess to be believers)! He writes this letter to call Christians to repent and to put him back at the centre of their lives and the life of the congregation.

The promise is, if this church repents Christ will eat with his people and we will reign with him. This points forward to those wonderful chapters at the end of the book where the marriage supper of the lamb takes place. We can know these promises are true because of what Jesus says at the end of verse 21. “Just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” . The vision of Christ in Revelation 1 is the confidence we have that our future is secure.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What does Jesus say about himself in verse 14? Why do you think he reminds this church of these things?

What is wrong with this church? What is Jesus saying by using such a vivid metaphor? (verse 15-16)

What is the source of their problem as a church (verse 17)? What wrong attitude do they have?

What have this church forgotten? In what way are they “wretched.....naked”?

How can the Laodicean church become hot/cold again? (verse 18) What do these things symbolise?

Verse 20 is often used as an evangelistic text calling non believers to come to Christ. Who is Jesus speaking to? How does it summarise the problem in Laodicea?

What does Jesus promise to those who repent? What confidence do we have that these promise are true?

Looking back over the letters to the seven churches, what have we learnt about what Jesus says is important in his church? What have we learnt about the future of the church?

