

5. The Church that the Lord will Spit out

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[0 : 00] Now, if we could have our Bibles open, please, at Revelation 3, that's on page 103.0. We'll have a word of prayer. Father, whose strength is made perfect in weakness, and whose power comes through jars of clay, may that happen this evening.

May indeed the gracious Spirit whom we have prayed to, and whom we need every moment of every day, may that Spirit take the things of Christ and reveal them to us, and lead us to the living Word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray. Amen.

And so we come this evening to the last of the seven churches that we've been studying over those last weeks. Some of you may have read the stories of Walter Mitty by the American author James Thurber, Now, Walter Mitty was an indistinguished and unimpressive little man, whose whole life was spent projecting other things that he wanted to be.

He wanted to be an airline pilot. He wanted to be a president. He wanted to be the chairman of a company. There was nothing at all that Walter Mitty didn't want to be, but all these things were things that he was totally, utterly incapable of doing and being.

And here we have the Walter Mitty Church. Look at verse 17. You say, I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing, not realizing that you are poor and miserable, blind and naked.

[1 : 45] So this is the church we're looking at this evening. The church the Lord wants to spit out. The word is actually vomit. It's not a pleasant word. The authorized version uses the word spew, which is not an elegant word.

But you see, the point is, this is not an elegant idea. The risen Lord is saying there is something about this church that makes him want to vomit. That is what he's saying. And that picks up from the Old Testament, from the passages where the Lord warns that if his people behave like the Canaanites in whose land they have come to, the land will vomit them out, as it has vomited out the Canaanites.

This is serious. This is deadly. Now, I said at the beginning, and I've said several times throughout the series, this is not a coded history of the church from the first century to the coming of Christ. This is a wonderful picture of the whole church throughout the world, throughout the centuries, at all times. And all churches need to hear from all the other churches.

Now, Laodicea was a very prosperous city. It stood at important trade routes, and it was a banking and commercial centre, famous for its clothing, famous for its eye ointment, which are, of course, reflected in the letter, and also famous that nearby were tepid springs, which were nauseating to taste, and that's reflected here as well.

[3 : 12] Well, the question we've got to ask ourselves is, what was so dreadful about this church? Now, we've looked at the other churches and seen some pretty awful things happening. Was this church riddled with heresy and false teaching?

There's another word about it. Was this church riddled with serious immorality? Once again, there is not a word about it.

Was it riddled with personality feuds, with unpleasant people trying to do each other down? Once again, there was no mention of that.

And in Laodicea, there were none of those things, because there was not enough life in Laodicea for such weeds to take root and grow. Some churches are too dead even for heresies.

Some churches are too dead even for personality disputes. Some churches are simply, as this church is, a black hole. And that's what we're going to be looking at now.

[4 : 15] And first of all, let's look at how the Lord comes to the church. We've noticed that the Lord comes to the church in words taken from the opening vision in chapter 1.

He comes to this church as the Amen, taken from Isaiah 65, verse 16, the God of the Amen. In other words, holy, true, holy, full of integrity.

Nothing will be hidden from his eyes. He comes to us the faithful and true witness, once again echoing chapter 1.

He is keeping the faith, even if they're not. And he comes as the beginning of all God's creation. He comes to them as the creator and says, you can't be half-hearted.

You can't be apathetic in your attitude towards the creator. So I want to say three things as we look through this. First of all, there is a stinging rebuke in verses 15 to 17.

[5 : 12] I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. And the first thing about this stinging rebuke is this truly deadly apathy. Neither cold nor hot.

And the local allusion, commentators often point out, is to the tepid springs of water, some five miles from the city. But there's a difficulty here, isn't there? You can understand why the risen Lord wanted the church to be hot.

Why would he want it to be cold rather than apathetic? I want to suggest this. If a church is cold and dead, the word can bring it to life.

That is what the living word does. Those who are in the graves hear the voice of the Son of God and come to life. But if a church has wrapped itself with layer and layer and layer of respectable apathy, virtually no voice can penetrate into that.

This church, as John Stott says, is dying in respectable nominalism. You see, the sobering thought is if we had gone to Laodicea, we'd probably come away feeling this is quite a fine outfit.

[6 : 25] After all, there's no... probably lots of people went there. Probably had plenty of money. Probably lots of things were going on. And yet, these things are going on without the living spirit.

And that's the second thing. Self-sufficiency. Now think about it this way. Without the spirit of God, we can do almost anything. We can instruct people.

We can encourage people. We can even inspire people. We can invite them for cups of coffee. We can befriend them. We can do all these kind of things. And they are good in themselves. But the one thing we cannot do without the spirit is we cannot bring life to the dead.

We cannot cause Christians to grow. And that's why so many churches become so little more than mutual admiration societies.

After all, you'll notice a word that's totally missing here. Where is the mention of the Lord Jesus Christ in all this? Where is Wesley's phrase, I offered Christ to them?

[7 : 35] It's not there. This church is bragging about itself, about its achievements, about its status. And the risen Lord says, not realizing you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Self-sufficiency and self-congratulation. We are rich. Maybe it means money. But maybe it's also spiritual superiority. Paul talks in 1 Corinthians 4.

He attacks the Corinthians and says, you're already kings. You're already behaving as if the world had come had happened. I wish you were kings so that we could be king about you. A stinging rebuke to a church which has become self-obsessed, which is no longer becoming a window through which people see the Lord Jesus Christ.

A church more concerned about talking about their own achievements. Isn't that so dangerous? Isn't it such a temptation for all of us?

Talking about our achievements rather than talking about the Lord Jesus Christ through whom alone we can do anything. So there is a stinging rebuke. Secondly, oh sorry, before we leave the stinging rebuke, there is a final part of it.

[8 : 51] You are blind and naked. A lack of vision. There is no sense of reality. This church is living in fantasy land as so many churches do.

So many churches look out on the world and say, we're really doing great. Aren't we doing well?

This is so common in the Church of Scotland these days. People say, the Church of Scotland is in good heart.

It always happens when the moderator goes, of course, because people always turn up to hear the moderator and so on. It always happens and people assume that we are in good heart.

A lack of vision. Lack of reality. He asks them, I count you to buy from me gold, rich and so on and solve to anoint your eyes that you may see.

This Laodicean optrex is making them more blind rather than helping them to see. They do not see what they are. They do not see who Christ is.

[9 : 50] And naked. The allusion is ultimately to Genesis 3, isn't it? The nakedness of sinfulness before the Lord. Laodicea, bragging that it is a living church, is actually pitiable and naked.

And contrasts, of course, with later on in the book when John sees the vision of the church standing before the throne of God and of the Lamb. He says, their robes were washed white by the blood of the Lamb.

So there is a stinging rebuke. Secondly, there is an urgent remedy. Verses 18 to 20. The scalpel has mercilessly exposed the cancer that is eating away this church.

But there is a remedy. Just as last week we saw, Philadelphia was a good, living, vital, mission-minded church. But it was still necessary to conquer.

It was still necessary to overcome. Even in Laodicea, it is possible to live a life that pleases God. You must never make a church within an excuse for this kind of behaviour.

[10 : 55] So what does the Lord say? First of all, he says, buy. Echo of the great 55th chapter of Isaiah. Come and buy from me. Come and buy wine and milk.

Come and buy the living word of God. Take the word of God seriously and obey it. Indeed, the contemporary jargon buy into would give you the nuance of this.

Buy into the word of God. Don't buy into all this show and drasmataz. Buy into the word of God and gold making you fit for the city of gold at the end of the book and white clothes, the garments of the righteous as the verse says in Romans which led to the conversion of St. Augustine.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Don't go around prancing with your new clothes. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ. As one of the contemporary hymn writers says about so many contemporary hymns, the bride of Christ seems to spend an awful lot of time admiring herself in the mirror.

That's what Laodicea is doing but the mirror is a false mirror. Then he says in this famous verse, Behold I stand at the door and knock.

[12 : 12] Now that's echoing Philadelphia, I have set before you an open door. Now here's another door which needs to be opened. Many of you will know Holman's Hunt, famous picture of this which I think is in Keeble College and invite me and make me part of your life.

You see part of the problem sometimes with us is that we can be embarrassed by our youthful enthusiasm and I know of course sometimes when we first come to know the Lord we can be brash and we can be rather go over the top.

What if the Lord remembers those days not so much as days of brash enthusiasm but of days when we loved Jesus a bit more than we do now? That's what this is saying.

Come in and eat with him and he with me and verse 19 those whom I love I reprove so be zealous and repent.

Throw off your apathy throw off your indifference and repent. There is something you can do about it. Remember as long as the risen Lord is speaking to us there is always something we can do.

[13 : 24] As long as the living spirit is speaking in our hearts we can always do something about it. The urgent remedy is to return to the Christ whom we turned our back on.

To return to the worth which we no longer love. To trust in the spirit whom we now rather despise. So we have a stinging rebuke. We have the urgent remedy and finally we have the glorious recompense.

Verses 21 and 22 the one who conquers. Conquers presumably meaning perseveres. the one who goes on to the end in spite of what's happening.

I will grant him to sit with me on my throne as I also conquered. You'll notice this most dismal of all the churches is given the most glorious of all the blessings.

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's the Lord saying to Laodicea?

[14 : 26] The Lord is saying to Laodicea you have a good conceit of yourselves. You're very, very full of your accomplishments. You really are fairly dreadful in your posturing and in your boasts.

Is that better than reigning with Christ? Is it better to posture now if everyone is speaking well of us or is it better to reign with the Lord Christ when he returns again?

That's the only answer to Laodicea and of course the verse which has occurred over and over and over again throughout the letters he who has an ear let him hear what the spirit is saying to the churches that's not just to Laodicea of course that's to us that's to every church that's ever been across the world throughout the whole history of the end of this short series one or two points I just want to make to sum it up no church of course corresponds exactly to any one of those seven

churches what we have rather are churches which whose behaviour whose beliefs whose attitudes in many ways are reflected in these seven churches all of them matter for us remember the letter to the seven churches is the whole book of Revelation not just chapters 2 and 3 hope at some point we'll be able to go on into the further parts of it because this is the letter to the churches and we need to hear what is said to all the churches we need to hear the message both

Philadelphia and Laodicea we need to hear the message from Ephesus about losing our first love we need to hear the message from Thyatira about tolerating false teaching all these kind of things we need to hear but the final point I want to make is this we are not going to put our churches right so to speak simply by picking out from the seven churches all the things that we think apply to us and trying to put them right we are only going to do it by hearing what the spirit says to the churches in other words we are only going to do it as our loyalty as our devotion as our belief in the word of God and the living Christ to whom it points becomes total that is what these messages are saying he who has a mirror let him hear what the spirit says to the churches amen let's pray father how easily we slip into

Laodicea how easily we slip into Sardis having a reputation for being alive and dead help us instead to be like Smyrna and Philadelphia an open door for the gospel an open door for those who will come in and appreciate that gospel above all give to us the grace and the wisdom to listen to the words of the Lord of the church that he gives to us by his Holy Spirit we ask this in his name Amen