

The Church the Lord wants to spit out

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[0 : 00] Well, let me welcome you to this Lunchtime Bible Talk. This is the fifth and the last of this little series we've been doing in Revelation 2 and 3.

Remember, these messages from the Risen Lord to the seven churches in Asia, and today we're coming to the last church in that group, the church in Laodicea.

Our main reading is Revelation 3, 14 to 22, but I want to read once again, just to remind us, the vision of the Risen Lord in chapter 1.

So what we'll do is we'll read chapter 1, verses 9 to 20, which is on page 102.8, and then we'll turn over to Revelation 3, 14 to 22.

So let's hear the Word of God. Revelation 1, verse 9. I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[1 : 06] I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands. And in the midst of the lampstands, one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe with a golden sash around his chest.

The hairs of his head were white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars. From his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, Fear not, I am the first and the last and the living one.

[2 : 17] I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades. Write, therefore, the things that you have seen, those that are, and those that are to take place after this.

As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Now over the page to 103.0 and to verse 14 of chapter 3, and the message to the church in Laodicea. And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write, The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. Would that you are either cold or hot, so because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

[3 : 33] I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments, so that you may clothe yourself, and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and solve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me.

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered, and sat down with my father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. Now let's pray together. Lord God, as we hear these penetrating, these powerful, and in many ways chilling words, we are dismayed.

We are dismayed at our own sinfulness, at our own weakness, at our own carelessness and laxity, at our propensity to turn away from you. Holy living eludes us, and we are so ready to run our own way and to excuse ourselves.

[4 : 55] Give to us the vision that John saw on Patmos, vision that made him tremble and fall down as dead, and yet the one which received the reassuring words, do not be afraid.

I am the first and the last. We thank you, Lord, that for this message, this message that comes, that came not just to these churches in Roman Asia many centuries ago, but these messages that are for the whole church during the whole period until the Lord returns.

So indeed, Lord, open our ears that we may hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Amen.

Some of you may have read James Thurber's book, *Walter Mitty*.

Walter Mitty was an undistinguished, dull little man who lived in fantasy land. One day, he imagined he was chairman of a large company. Another time, he imagined he was leading a polar expedition. He even imagined he was president of the United States. All the time, he was living in this narrow, restricted, petty little world, living in fantasy land.

[6 : 06] Here we come to the *Walter Mitty Church*, the church, the church who is living in fantasy land. He asked the poet, T.S. Eliot, said, humankind cannot bear very much reality.

Church and Laodicea appear to be unable to bear any reality at all. Now, Laodicea was the seventh of the churches. I suggested in the first talk that there is no particular spiritual significance in the order of the churches.

Rather, it's geographical. The messenger leaving Ephesus goes in a kind of semicircle and now returns back near the coast at Laodicea and then presumably to Philadelphia and down to Ephesus itself.

It was a prosperous city. It stood at the intersection of important trade routes in the ancient world. It was a banking and commercial center, the place famous for its eye ointment, and some commentators make a great deal of this self to anoint your eyes as Laodicean optrex or whatever it was.

And it was also a place with springs which are neither hot nor cold and commentators make a great deal of this as well. I'm not sure these things particularly help us to get the spiritual meaning of the passage, but anyway, it's quite interesting.

[7 : 28] But what is so dreadful about Laodicea? As we've looked at the other churches over these past weeks, we've noticed that the risen Lord commends and condemns.

Here, there is no commendation at all. There is nothing but condemnation. Now, what are the things the risen Lord has condemned in the other churches? He has condemned heresy and false teaching.

You would expect Laodicea was riddled with heresy, a haven for false teachers and false prophets. Not a single word of that.

He's condemned immorality, sexual immorality, the woman Jezebel he talked about in one of the churches. Once again, not a word of it. If you've gone to Laodicea, they would all have been respectable, upstanding people whose careers would have borne the scrutiny of the tabloid press. What else has he condemned? He's condemned laxity under persecution. Not a word of it again. So, what is so dreadful about this church?

[8 : 45] None of these things appear to be in Laodicea. And in Laodicea, there were none of those things because there wasn't enough life in Laodicea for such weeds to take root and spring up.

This is a church which is totally dead. This is a church where the risen Lord looks into them, looks behind the facade, looks behind their glittering website and says, you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

And to this church, we've noticed how the risen Lord comes to the church with elements drawn from the opening vision. He comes as the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the one whose words, the one who will have the last word.

He is the first word and the last word. He is the beginning of God's creation. He knows the end from the beginning. And he comes to this church and he condemns it.

And yet, as we'll see, there is still a door open for those who will return to him. So first of all, there is a stinging rebuke, verses 15 to 17.

[10 : 08] What characterizes Laodicea? Well, it is neither cold nor hot. I say, the local allusion to the tepid springs of water some five miles from the city.

There's a problem with this. You can understand the risen Lord saying, I wish you were hot. Why does the risen Lord say, I wish you were cold rather than the situation you're in?

You see, I think the point is this. If the church were hot, it would be responding to the word of God. If it were cold in the sense of completely alienated from the Lord, then the living word could bring them to life.

The dead hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear live. That will be true on the last day. It's also true when the living word of God speaks to the spiritually dead.

But this apathy, this black hole that sucks everything into it, this is an attitude which cannot hear and cannot learn.

[11 : 18] If a church is cold and if a church is declining and knows it, then there is hope. If a church is like Laodicea and does not know it, then the Lord wants to, there's no way of making this nice, the Lord wants to spit them out of his mouth.

Authorized version, I will spew you out of my mouth. I will vomit you out of my mouth. Another phrase picked up from the Old Testament about the land vomiting out the Canaanite inhabitants and the land vomiting out God's own people when they are sent into exile in Babylon.

There is a deadly, deadly apathy that sucks everything in. A black hole that's impossible to, you know, it's the kind of church I could imagine if you preached in this church.

It would be like speaking into a thick blanket of fog. It would be like speaking and your words coming back to you. There's also self-sufficiency.

You say, notice the verse 17, you say, I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing. This explains the nauseating banality of many churches, doesn't it, which come little more than mutual admiration societies where people continually praise one another for the good things they are doing.

[12 : 40] Remember, all these things can be done in the energy of the flesh. Other groups will do good. They'll make coffee for you.

They'll do social service. You know, all these kind of things. But, this church is offering itself. If you went on to the Lay of the Sea and website, what would they say?

We are rich. We've got plenty money coming in. Plenty bums on pews. Lots and lots happening here. We are busy.

No mention of Christ. Remember, John Wesley summed up his ministry. I offer Christ to them. Self-sufficient and self-congratulation as well.

Rather like what Paul detected in Corinth. One Corinthians, he says, you have become rich. You have become successful. Tenually speaking about itself and its success.

[13 : 41] That's Laodicea. And to this church comes this stinging rebuke. I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. They are blind and they are naked.

Notice, you may clothe yourself, verse 18, that you're ashamed of your nakedness and you may not be seen and solved to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

In other words, they lack a sense of reality. And this always happens when churches and other communities become inward-centered, always talking about themselves because they lack any sense of proportion.

You see, this naked illusion is ultimately, of course, the Genesis 3. the nakedness as they try to hide before the Lord whose eyes search heaven and earth.

The nakedness of sin. In contrast to the redeemed around the throne in chapter 7 whose robes are made white by the blood of the Lamb. And they're blind.

[14 : 45] They have no sense. They have no sense of vision. This is pretty drastic, isn't it? It is a stinging rebuke. And, as I say, Laodicea is not a heretical church.

Laodicea is not a church plagued by immorality. Laodicea is not a church that is anything but outwardly successful.

Secondly, there is the urgent remedy in verses 18 to 20. The scalpel has mercilessly exposed what's wrong.

But there is a remedy. And this is the important thing. Last week, we looked at Philadelphia. And in Philadelphia, it's almost a mirror image of this church, there is no condemnation.

The Lord does not condemn anything in Philadelphia. Not, of course, that they were perfect. But even in Philadelphia, there is still the call to hear. There is still the call to conquer.

[15 : 46] The call to persevere. And here, even in Laodicea, it is still possible to live a life that pleases God. Just as said last week, we can't hide behind a flourishing fellowship as if we were flourishing ourselves.

So, a fellowship like this, it is still possible to conquer. Notice verse 19, 19, those whom I love and reprove and discipline, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

They are not so far gone that the voice cannot still be heard, that the knock at the door cannot still be listened to, that the door cannot still be opened. And then again, verse 21, the one who conquers, the one who perseveres.

It's always possible. So, what is the Lord saying to Laodicea? He's saying, verse 18, buy from me gold refined by fire. This echoes the great chapter Isaiah 55 of the word of God, come and buy without, the paradox, buy without money and without price.

The word of God is a free gift of God's grace, but buying suggests that we need to take it seriously to obey it. Modern jargon, buy into.

[17 : 04] That's, in what some senses that would give the take on board. Take it seriously. Buy it. It's valuable. Gold refined by fire so that you may be rich.

You're not rich at the moment, but you can be rich. And gold, I suppose, that is to be fit for the golden city at the end of the book. Remember, remember often the, in Scripture, gold, well, in 1 Corinthians 3, I think it is, Paul talks about building gold, silver, and precious stones rather than wood, hay, and straw.

Now, wood, hay, and straw are valuable commodities in their own place and in their own way. The one thing they cannot do is survive the fire. And the one thing that the goal, the Lord is saying, your faith has got to be a faith that survives the fire, fire of judgment.

And the, I mean, white garments, now white garments in Revelation are, as I already said, is the garment of the redeemed, the bride of the lamb in chapter 19 is clothed in white linen, ultimately going back to the high priest on the great day of atonement when he wore a white robe to symbolize both penitence and purity.

This, this theme of clothes is a minor theme that runs through Scripture, outward appearance and inward attitude. Ultimately, ultimately, it, in Romans 13, you get, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

[18 : 42] That's the, that's the ultimate image of clothes. Put on Christ. Dress, dress in his righteousness and the renewed vision anoint your eyes that you may see.

You may see Christ turn your eyes away from this. And then he asked them to be opened. Behold, I stand, verse 20, at the door and knock. Some of you may have seen or at least reproductions of the, the painting by Holman Hunt which is in Keeble College in Oxford.

This scene has been immortalized. I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me. A true fellowship, true relationship, true, true understanding of who this Christ is, true food to eat.

And there is repentance. Verse 17, it's not at all surprising that he, sorry, not verse 17, verse 19, be zealous and repent.

Laodicea is apathetic. Laodicea doesn't care. Therefore, he doesn't just say repent. He says be zealous and repent because he realizes it's the apathetic attitude that's keeping them from repentance.

[19 : 49] So, the stinging rebuke, the urgent remedy, and then the promise, the glorious promise, the glorious recompense which is breathtaking. The one who conquers, as I said already, that means the one who in the middle of Laodicea does not behave in a Laodicean way.

The most dismal of the churches is offered the most glorious of the promises. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne as I also conquer, sharing in the reign of Christ.

Now, don't interpret that as that in eternity you'll be wearing negligee, sitting on marble thrones with a gold crown around your head. This is the, this is saying you will fulfill God's ancient purpose.

Why was humanity created? Humanity was created to rule the earth as God's vice regents and that will be the case in the new creation. God's never set aside his purpose.

The redeemed, those who persevere, will be, share with him in the reign over that new creation. So, that's far better than, than anything that might happen.

[21 : 03] You see, Laodicea, like the church in Corinth, think they're already sitting on thrones, think they've already made it. The risen Lord says you haven't made it. You are poor, wretched, pitiable, blind, and naked, but, if you repent, look at the glorious prospect.

No need to posture and pretend to rule now, rule then. And, the whole, this whole section, the first section of the book, ends with the often repeated phrase, he who has a near, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

And, remember the point I made already, the whole book of Revelation is a letter to the churches. These are individual notes, if you like, to the individual churches. But, since the whole book is to be read, Laodicea needed to hear what was said to Ephesus, Smyrna needed to hear what was said to Philadelphia, and so on.

How do we hear what the Spirit says to the churches? We don't hear what the Spirit says to the church if we go away and empty our minds and try and listen to the voice in silence.

We hear what the Spirit says to the churches as we delve into his word. That, this word which the Lord has given, not just for the guidance of the church then, but for the guidance of the church now.

[22 : 18] As Peter says, the light shining in the dark place, the word of the apostles and the prophets. As we come to the end of this little study, we end with these words ringing in our ears.

Those who have ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Let's pray. Lord God, as we have looked into this church and into the others over the last few weeks, we recognize so many of the sins and failings in our own heart.

Lord, we don't need to look at others, other people, other places, other fellowships to find these. We find them all writ large in our own hearts. We thank you, Lord, for the merciless exposing of these errors is followed by the call to repent and the promise of glory to come.

And so bless us, Lord, as we listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches and as by his grace we try to live in this fallen world proclaiming the wonderful deeds of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Amen.