

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God's Message to Seven Churches: Laodicea: A Church in Danger

So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. (Revelation 3:16–18, KJV 1900)

Distasteful as the idea may be, this language depicts God as extremely nauseated. What caused this condition? The language is metaphorical, to be precise, "Anthropomorphic." It associates human conditions or behavior onto God to communicate something in a way that we can understand. It is not literal; not intended to be viewed as literal. The intent is to communicate that something this church was doing so displeased God as to evoke this response—if God were human. The passage nudges us to consider just how strongly God dislikes and rejects the behavior of this church.

The dispensational allegorical interpretation of the seven churches in Asia asserts that each church "Represents" a mini-age or dispensation that describes Christianity during that era of the New Testament age. Inevitably, this groundless allegorical interpretation concludes that we live in the final era of the age; we live in the "Laodicean" era of Christianity. The first reason to reject this view is that the first three chapters of Revelation indicate that the Holy Spirit directed John to write these letters to seven literal churches that existed and that were dealing with seven different situations, including problems that required confrontation, rebuke, and correction. The typical consequence of allegorical interpretation strips Scripture of invaluable instruction and light. Perhaps some churches exist today whose smug, arrogant carnality paints them with a "Laodicean" brush, but many churches also exist who strive to remain faithful and steadfast in their faith. They in no way deserve the Laodicean label. What was the Laodicean problem? What about this church evoked such a strong warning from the Lord?

1. *Because thou sayest, I am rich....* At the heart, this church lived in a self-created fantasy. She smugly ignored her spiritual poverty and thought of herself as the ideal church. By looking at herself instead of to her Lord, she lived in an imaginary world of her own self-centeredness. Some wise Bible student rightly observes that the personal pronoun "I" resides in the very

middle, the heart of every action that is rightly described as "sin."

2. *...and increased with goods....* This church was more pleased with what she had than with her character. Paul warned the Corinthian Church that her works faced the trial of fire. Though Paul and other godly men had laid a reliable foundation of truth to the Corinthians, they had busied themselves building the wrong kind of life, and the wrong kind of church, on that good foundation. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15) As you read this lesson, imagine different buildings, each containing a large quantity of the individual materials named. "*Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble....*" (1 Corinthians 3:12 KJVP) If fire hits the first three buildings, the material retains its precious content and form. However, if the fire hits one of the last three buildings, it will go up in smoke and ashes. The foundation is secure and unharmed, but the materials that we use to build on the good foundation shall face a certain "Trial by fire." Laodicea Church would be devastated by this spiritual fire, the very consequence of which the Lord warned her.
3. *...and have need of nothing.* Can you imagine that any church exists anywhere that is so flawless, that has need of nothing whatever? No! That church doesn't exist in this world. Such a self-reliant church, believer, or preacher faces God's certain judgment; the consequence of that self-reliance shall surely be a full "Burn-out." The timing and circumstance shall be the Lord's, but Scripture assures us; the **burnout is certain**. Based on Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 3:15, the burnout shall be complete, but the person whose foolish building was destroyed in the fire is saved, though left with nothing but symbolical smoke and ashes to show for his/her foolish building.

The Lord didn't cause the Laodicean Church to fall into this sinful behavior, but He does give her the solution for her self-inflicted sins. Notice His words, "*Because thou sayest...I counsel thee....*" The Lord knows every thought and imagination that we think. When we err in our thoughts, motives, and actions, He confronts us, and counsels us to repent and return to godliness that is Christ-centered, not self-centered.

I counsel thee.... A particular fatalistic belief occasionally will assert, "if left to myself, I can only sin." This view holds that God either directly or indirectly causes everything that occurs, good and bad, so any act of obedience has nothing to do with the believer's will or with the indwelling Holy Spirit and God's law written on the heart of His child. The assertion at its heart contradicts Scripture. Hebrews 13:5 contradicts this premise, and many other Scriptures join the point made there. To hold that God ever "Leaves us to ourselves" is to deny our study passage, "*I counsel thee....*" If God ever truly left us to ourselves, it would mean that He refused to counsel His people to do His commandments.

On a few occasions I have engaged people in dialogue who consciously chose to ignore Scripture and conscience to indulge in their besetting sin despite God's condemning that sin. On one particular occasion, the person, following Adam's and Eve's fallen disposition to blame others for their sin, challenged me, "Joe, why didn't you ever tell me that this was wrong?" I responded with a pointed question, "First of all, I did tell you. Were you listening? Secondly, are you telling me that you had no sense of conviction, no sense that this behavior was contrary to God's moral commandments?" The person immediately acknowledged living with deep and abiding convictions that the conduct in question was wrong, that he/she chose to sin rather than to follow the Lord's clear and repeated words, "*I counsel thee....*"

Since the Lord knows us even better than we know ourselves—and far better than anyone else knows us—He alone is fully competent to give us moral and spiritual counseling. "*I counsel thee....*"

1. ...*to buy of me....* All three items that follow in this sentence come 1) from the Lord, and 2) at a price that we must pay. They are not free. The young man who went to Jesus with his wealth heard Jesus' vivid reminder that true discipleship comes at a price, one that he was reluctant to pay. (Mark 10:22) The Lord doesn't dole out the blessings of faithful obedience without charge. We must begin to make our payments on the price of discipleship with perhaps the most costly of payments, denial of self. (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23) That price is not a one-time payment. We need to pay it every day.

2. ...*gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich....* Paul warns against trusting in "...uncertain riches...." (1 Timothy 6:17) Try as we might to secure them, material possessions inherently fall short of our desires for material "Certainty." Early in my retirement planning, I failed to watch one of my investments, and before I knew I had a problem, I had lost half its value. I thought I had chosen one of the most respected and conservative investments on the market. I didn't notice that the fund changed philosophy and fund managers. Before I knew of the change, they had invested heavily in Enron and lost half of my investment. We cannot secure uncertain material riches from loss. Thankfully, the Lord's wealth is not like material possessions. His bank never fails. His investments never turn a loss. The Lord's counsel to His people and to His churches guides us to spiritual wealth. We slowly learn from Him to trust in Him, as Abraham did, and not in ourselves or in our material possessions. We may be penniless in material possessions and yet abound in spiritual wealth. Or we may be millionaires and spiritually bankrupt. In a church, as in an individual believer's life, self-reliance spells disaster, and that is the Lord's warning to all little Laodicean churches.
3. ...*and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear....* White clothing speaks of godly character, of a conscious—and conscientious—avoiding of sinful habits. God requires a change in our behavior, not simply our intentions. All we need to turn God's "Stomach ache" to a smile of approving grace we must buy from Him, not create for ourselves.
4. ...*and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.* Children of God may so live as to self-inflict spiritual blindness onto themselves. (2 Peter 1:9) Peter indicates that this self-inflicted blindness may become so intense that we forget that God has purged us from our sins. How we act imposes specific consequences onto our spiritual "Vision." We may faithfully serve God according to the teachings of Scripture, and enjoy spiritual wisdom far beyond our human knowledge. Or we may ignore God's clear teachings in Scripture, teachings that instruct a church as fully as they instruct individual believers, in the "Art of godly living." When we choose a course of action, we choose blindness or 20/20 spiritual sight. Where do you and I stand compared to this Laodicean problem? Perhaps we all need to go to God's "Store" and buy more of life's supplies from Him.

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Worship service each Sunday
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.
Pastor