

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## God's Message to Seven Churches: Laodicea: A Confused Church

*And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. (Revelation 3:14–15, KJV 1900)*

The letters to each of the seven churches in this context relate significant details regarding the culture and geography of the city. A church may rightly seek to be "In the world, but not of the world," but the idea may work better as a cliché than as a fact. Put the members of your church in that world five or six days a week and they will bring some of that world's trappings into the pew when they come to church.

Many cultural factors influence a godly church, but I fear that one of the most damaging and insidious of influences that erode a church's spirituality is material wealth. Study the history of Christianity in our own country prior to and subsequent to the Industrial Revolution. As prosperity increases in a culture, spirituality chills and shrinks. If you enjoy any degree of material comfort, look into your own life to see this influence.

Laodicea was situated on the bank of the River Lycus. Its position at the junction of three imperial roads traversing Asia Minor favoured its development as a wealthy commercial and administrative centre. Three facts known throughout the Roman world about the city throw light on this letter: it was a banking centre, whose banks even Cicero recommended for exchanging money; it manufactured clothing and woollen carpets, made especially from the glossy black wool of sheep reared locally; and it had a medical school and produced medicines, notably an eye ointment made from a pulverized rock in the area. The stern characterization of the church's spiritual life (17) and the call for its repentance (18) are both couched in terms of these three activities of the city.

The terms *cold*, *hot* and *lukewarm* are likely to relate to waters around and in Laodicea. Nearby Hierapolis was famed for its hot springs; Colosse, also near at hand, was noted for a cold, clear stream of excellent drinking water. Since, however, the River Lycus dried up in summer, Laodicea had to use a long viaduct for its water, which was not only tepid but impure and sometimes foul, making people sick. The

church of that city had that effect on Christ—a vivid and horrifying picture of judgment.<sup>1</sup>

*These things saith the Amen...* We use "Amen" to close our prayers, but we seldom hear the word used in other ways. The Greek word from which "Amen" was translated identifies truth. In the gospels, we often read of Jesus beginning a teaching with "Verily," a translation of the same word. He effectively said, "Truly," or "This is true. Take heed." The Lord will say some things to this church that they do not want to hear, but He warns them in advance. He speaks only truth, and they need to listen.

*When I therefore was thus minded, did I use lightness? or the things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yea yea, and nay nay? But as God is true, our word toward you was not yea and nay. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us, even by me and Silvanus and Timotheus, was not yea and nay, but in him was yea. For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us. (2 Corinthians 1:17-20 KJV)*

Have you ever heard a man preach or talked to someone and, as you reflected, you wondered what the man really said. His words were misleading or confusing. Remember that dialogue. It epitomizes everything that a preacher of the gospel should avoid in his communication. If the man sticks to the Bible charge of preaching Jesus, his message will be concise, clear, and easily understood. He consciously avoids speaking so that the folks who want to hear him say, "Yes," will think that is what he said, and the folks who want him to say, "No," will think that is what he said. The faithful message of the gospel that keeps its focus on the Lord Jesus Christ is always "Yes," "Amen," or "True."

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed., Re 3:14–22 (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

Jesus Christ called Himself the “Amen” (lit. So be it). We should probably understand this title as a testimony to His ability to produce what He predicts (cf. Isa. 65:16). As a “Witness,” His testimony to the situation in Laodicea was trustworthy. The Laodiceans had a reputation for saying and doing whatever was necessary to preserve their own well-being.<sup>2</sup>

The Lord didn’t reduce His message to the lowest common denominator in Laodicean culture. They may have rationalized that saying or doing what would preserve their own well-being, but He spoke only truth. His words of faithful truth contrasted with their rationalized words of self-preservation.

As broken humans, we should never evade truthfulness. However, because we are broken humans, we also need to be cautious that we avoid using truth as a club to beat people. We’ve all encountered someone who says, “I call it the way I see it. I don’t care how it rubs you,” and sensed that the person seemed to enjoy heaping misery onto your back. We suffer from this liability, but the Lord knows how to put His truth, even when He speaks it in warning judgment to an erring church, into wise counsel. Our youngest daughter, a first grade teacher, has an uncanny way of using her sense of humor to coax her students into good behavior and usually to make them like it in the process, a true gift. When we keep our hearts fixed on our God, His warning words nudge us to want to do His commandments, and to like the doing. When we turn from Him, our hearts are hardened, and we provoke Him to judgment.

...*the faithful and true witness*... The Lord adds the quality of “Faithful” to true in this point. Most pastors who deal with members and their real life problems find sad occasions often to ponder why people find it so difficult to be honest, faithful, and true. Whether on the job, in the family, or in a church, these qualities will consistently produce a better outcome, even for the individual who has failed or sinned, than being unfaithful or untrue.

...*the beginning of the creation of God*. One particular philosophy that claims to base its teachings on the Bible refers to this and similar passages (Such as Colossians 1:15), interpreting them so as to imply that Jesus was the first being that God created. Don’t miss the point. This philosophy teaches that Jesus is a creature, not the Creator. The point of these verses is that Jesus is the Creator, the Beginner, Initiator of God’s creation, not that He is the first of created beings. Paul clearly makes this point.

*For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions,*

<sup>2</sup> Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*, Re 3:14 (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

*or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him.* (Colossians 1:16 KJV)

Paul states this truth so simply. Jesus was not created; He was the Creator; “...by him were all things created....” If, as this errant philosophy suggests, Jesus was the first of created beings, then He apparently created Himself before He existed, utter nonsense.

What is the point of this reference to His “...*beginning of the creation of God*...” in this passage? A church too comfortably settled into a culture of wealth and influence is liable to think more highly of herself than she should. She needs a sharp reminder from the Lord who created the whole material universe. Trust in your wealth? God can take it from you in a heartbeat. Need something that you do not have? God can give it to you in the same heartbeat.

*For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof.* (Psalms 50:10-12 KJV)

Sensing this same frail reliance on the unreliable, Paul instructs Timothy to warn those who trusted in their uncertain riches.

*Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.* (1 Timothy 6:17 KJV)

You simply cannot amass enough wealth to find lasting security. In the lesson of the unjust steward, Jesus warns His followers to keep their priorities straight and to keep their trust in God, not “mammon,” pagan God of money. (Luke 16:1-13)

*I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.* The Lord repeats that disconcerting, “I know...” yet again, and to a church that needed the reminder. They might put on a convincing façade and fool their friends, but they could not fool God. (Galatians 6:7) Try a simple experiment. Turn a faucet onto a warm setting. Try to get the temperature as near to your body temperature as possible. Fill a glass with this tepid water and put your finger into it. What do you feel? Nothing, absolutely nothing! This church had become so comfortable in their Laodicean luxury that they had lost any sense of spiritual feeling. Their moral and spiritual compass was spinning like a top, not faithfully pointing to God and to His commandments. They would be better off in either of two extremes than in their present state of luxurious indifference.

I was born in 1941, near the end of the Great Depression and the beginning of World War II. My

parents were quite poor. Dad told us of spending his summers trying to develop a small farm from virgin forests and of working from daylight to dark during the winters for \$.25 a day. Yes, there is a decimal between the dollar sign and the number. He worked for a quarter a day! Of the many lessons our parents taught us well, the value of hard work and of honest earnings stood near the top. From my youth in this setting, I lived through the second half of the twentieth century and now more than a decade into the twenty-first. Our culture has slowly eroded from robust, hard-working, and honest, into a culture of slothful people who prefer a handout to hard work. In my youth, conservative, Bible-focused churches thrived. Today those same churches, regardless of the name, are faltering and disappearing. I suggest that too many of the people in too many of these churches have caught the lukewarm, disease-ridden waters of superficial prosperity, and their spiritual health has disappeared.

The Lord was far more severe in His warnings against the Laodicean Church than any of the other six. I suggest that, were He to send His personal letter to churches today, the letter would be equally shocking and full of similar warnings. Too many believers have decided that anything will work better than what God has spoken in His Scriptures, so they rationalize the warnings of Scripture away, and salve their sinful indifference with the warm, smelly, mineral-laden waters of self-seeking. No generation of Christians in many centuries needs to awaken to God's warnings to repent more than the generation in which we live. The Lord's commandment to repent is not to "Those folks," but to you and to me. Do we care enough for our God and for His commandments to consider actually repenting, changing our whole lifestyle into submission to Him? Forget the insanity that devastates churches; "The Bible doesn't really tell us how a church should carry on its business, so let's just worship God under our own vine and fig tree." When people choose to do that which is "...right in his own eyes," (Judges 21:25) they should not be surprised to experience the confused spiritual bewilderment that characterizes Israel during the time of the Book of Judges. They sow those seeds; they shall reap that harvest.

Are we ready and willing to repent? Are we prepared to meet God on His terms and to order our lives according to His Word? By our choices, we shall either repeat the Laodicean nightmare, or we shall find sweet fellowship with our God, but we cannot find that fellowship short of repentance and submission to Him.

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Worship service each Sunday  
Joseph R. Holder

10:30 A. M.  
Pastor