

The Church of Laodicea

"The Apostate Church"

Revelation 3:14-22

Introduction

We're closing out Revelation chapter 3 tonight with the last of the seven letters — the church at **Laodicea**. This is the final stop on the postal circuit through Asia Minor: Ephesus → Smyrna → Pergamos → Thyatira → Sardis → Philadelphia → **Laodicea**.

Where We Are on the Timeline

My takeaway from all this ...

Remember, these seven letters function on two levels:

1. **Literal** — real letters dictated by Jesus to real first-century churches, meant to be read aloud to real congregations.
2. **Prophetic** — a panoramic sketch of church history, from the apostolic age (Ephesus) to the present hour (Laodicea).

On that historical-prophetic timeline, the last two churches — **Philadelphia** and **Laodicea** — represent **two streams that run side by side to the end of the church age**:

Stream	Represented by	Character
The true church	Philadelphia	Evangelical, faithful, kept from the hour of trial
The apostate church	Laodicea	Liberal, self-sufficient, lukewarm

Some Bibles subtitle this letter "the lukewarm church." That's too soft. This is **the apostate church** — Christian in name, not in practice or doctrine.

Historical Background

- Founded by Antiochus II around 246 BC, named after his wife Laodice.
- Famous for three things:
 - A wealthy banking and trade city in the Lycus Valley (modern Turkey), about 40 miles southeast of Philadelphia. Many prominent people in the empire banked here
 - **glossy black wool** (fine clothing) - came from sheep that came from the area exclusively at the time
 - **medical eye salve** (an early form of boric acid, still used today) - to heal many types of eye issues
- Remember these details as Jesus will once again deliberately put a play on words to this church ... communicating to them on terms that they are familiar.
- The areas one physical weakness: **no local water source**. Water was piped in by aqueduct from hot springs at Hierapolis to the north. By the time it reached Laodicea, it arrived **lukewarm** — undrinkable, nauseating.
- In AD 60, an earthquake leveled the city. Rome offered rebuilding funds. Laodicea refused — they were wealthy enough to rebuild themselves. Admirable civic pride... but that mindset infected the church with the same spirit of self-sufficiency - meaning we can do this ourselves and don't need Jesus.
- Laodicea is mentioned four times in Colossians (2:1; 4:13, 15, 16). Paul references a letter he wrote **to** the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16) that we don't have.
- Colossae and Laodicea are close to each other; so as you read the book of Colossians you will find many of the same topics discussed by Paul.
- If you remember ... As an aside Paul wrote the first letter to Timothy from Laodicea.

Every detail in Jesus's rebuke — lukewarm water, wool, eye salve, wealth — is a deliberate **play on words** aimed straight at this city's identity that we will read now...

Read Rev 3:14-22

Verse-by-Verse Study

Verse 14 — The Title

"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.'" (ESV)

The word Lao we get people (remember the nicolations -- niko - to conquer, to rule -- laitians/leity - the people meaning to rule over the people) Laodiceans = lao/leity = people and diceans = rulers - so essentially "rule by the people".

Brings up the question ... who is suppose to rule the church?

Jesus introduces Himself with three titles -- these titles like this one is going back to the foundation:

- **The Amen** — He is reliable, true, the final word. "Amen" (so be it) is a word of confirmation; Jesus *is* God's yes to every promise (see 2 Cor. 1:20). Amen is a divine title echoed in Isaiah 65:16 where God is called the "God of Truth" or in hebrew, Elohei Amen - Jesus is claiming this for Himself
- **The faithful and true witness** — His testimony is accurate. This whole book is *"the revelation of Jesus Christ"* (Rev. 1:1), not John's opinion. Can't forget this is coming from Jesus himself ...
- **The beginning of God's creation** — not the *first created thing*, but the **source and ruler** of all creation (NIV: "the ruler of God's creation"). This is a clear claim to His preexistence and deity. More about rank and honor than a point of time.
 - Reference in Col 1:15
 - *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in "Heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rules or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."*
 - Paul specifically instructed that Colossae and Laodicea exchange epistles: why because of the question of who Jesus is/was that was starting to reveal gnostic errors in this valley.
 - That gnostic mindset and belief/approach contributes to the name of this church as the apostate church per our prophetic timeline. Today, we call it the liberal church -- these are churches that teach things like their are many ways to Heaven, that Hell doesn't exist or homosexuality is ok for the parishioners and the pastors.

Verse 15 — The Diagnosis

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!" (ESV)

In verse 15 we jump into the rebuke, the complaint from Jesus. What is missing? No commendations...

Unlike the other letters, Jesus opens with **zero commendation**. Not one good word. He goes straight to diagnosis: neither cold nor hot.

This isn't primarily about spiritual temperature or "passion." It's a **geographic joke with theological teeth**. Not about being physically hot or cold.

Hierapolis to the north had **hot** medicinal springs. Colossae to the south had **cold**, refreshing mountain water. Laodicea had neither — only tepid runoff, good for nothing but making you gag.

Verse 16 — The Verdict

"So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth." (ESV)

Strong language — "vomit" or "spit out." A lukewarm drink is the one thing you can't keep in your mouth; your body rejects it involuntarily. That's the picture: a church so tasteless to God that His reaction is physical revulsion, not measured disapproval.

Key point for the group: this isn't a rebuke of "sinners." It's a rebuke of a **church** — people who claim the name of Christ but have gone spiritually flat. Being lukewarm is worse, in some sense, than being openly cold, because it's self-deceived and can go either direction as the wind blows and the culture moves.

What is a lukewarm christian? A lukewarm Christian, per Skip Heitzig's list, is one who:

1. Straddles the fence spiritually
2. Has a conscience rarely touched
3. Doesn't take Jesus or the Bible seriously

4. Doesn't take sin or the lost world seriously
5. Is erratic at fellowship
6. Doesn't let Scripture guide life
7. Has no witness to others

OT Connection: *Zephaniah 1:12 — God says He will punish "the men who are complacent... who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.'" Complacency in Zephaniah's day looked exactly like lukewarmness here: a settled indifference toward God dressed up as peace.*

Verse 17 — The Self-Deception

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

Here's the root of the lukewarmness: **self-sufficiency**. "I have need of nothing" is the most damning sentence in all seven letters — because it's the one condition where a person feels no need to reach for God at all.

Five words describe their **actual** condition, contrasted with their self-image:

- **Wretched** — literally "afflicted, miserable"
- **Pitiable** — pathetic, an object of pity rather than envy
- **Poor** — spiritually bankrupt, despite material wealth
- **Blind** — ironic, given their famous eye salve
- **Naked** — ironic, given their famous wool clothing

The earthquake of AD 60 is the backstory here. Rome offered aid; Laodicea refused it, boasting of its own resources. That civic pride became the church's spiritual posture: **we don't need anyone — not Rome, not each other, not God.**

OT Connection: *Deuteronomy 8:12-14, 17-18 — Moses warns Israel about the exact same trap: "when you have eaten and are full... and your silver and gold is multiplied... then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God... Beware that you don't say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.'"*

Prosperity has always been more spiritually dangerous than persecution — it was true for Israel, and it's true here.

Verse 18 — The Remedy

"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 salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see." (ESV)

Jesus answers each of their three points of civic pride with a spiritual counter-offer:

Their pride	Jesus's counsel
Banking wealth	Gold refined in the fire — a purified, tested faith
Glossy black wool garments	White garments — the righteousness of Christ
Renowned eye salve	True salve — spiritual sight

Notice: He says "**buy** from me." Isn't a contradiction of grace — it's an invitation to give up false, self-made riches in exchange for the true riches only He can supply, at the cost of surrender rather than money. The cost of giving up your earthly life for external life.

OT Connection: *Isaiah 55:1 — "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!" — the language of "buying" what cannot be purchased with currency is straight out of Isaiah's invitation to covenant grace.*

OT Connection: *Job 23:10 — "When he has tried me, I shall come out as gold." Refining by fire as a picture of tested, purified faith runs throughout the Wisdom literature (see also Psalm 66:10, Proverbs 17:3, Malachi 3:3).*

OT Connection: *Zechariah 3:3-5 — the high priest Joshua stands before the Lord in filthy garments; God commands, "Remove the filthy garments... I will clothe you with pure vestments." This is almost a direct picture of verse 18 — filthy clothes exchanged for clean ones by God's initiative alone.*

OT Connection: *Genesis 3:7, 21 — the very first "nakedness and shame" in Scripture, covered by God's own provision (garments of skin, at the cost of a sacrifice). Laodicea's nakedness before God echoes Eden.*

Verse 19 — The Motive Behind the Rebuke

"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent." (ESV)

This is the hinge verse. As harsh as verses 15-17 sound, this is not rejection — it's **discipline born of love**. Jesus doesn't walk away from Laodicea. He confronts them precisely *because* He loves them. Their condition (blindness/nakedness) are not incurable.

Two commands follow: **be zealous** (stop being lukewarm — get on fire) and **repent** (turn around).

OT Connection: *Proverbs 3:11-12 — "My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." This is the direct source of Jesus's language here — and it's quoted again in Hebrews 12:5-6 as a word of encouragement to a suffering church. Discipline is proof of sonship, not abandonment.*

Verse 20 — The Invitation

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." (ESV)

Perhaps the most famous quoted verse in Revelation — and one of the most misapplied.

In what situation at a church do we typically hear this verse referenced? This isn't primarily an evangelistic altar-call verse (though it's often used that way).

Yes it is a great evangelistic picture or tool, but isn't this a huge knock on the church of Laodicea? Why? Because where is Jesus? He's outside ... in chapter 1 we talked about Jesus had the churches in this right hand, and he walked in the midst of them. But at this time and not here...strong words.

Warner Sallman's famous 1942 painting *Christ at the Door* (based on Holman Hunt's 1853 original)

Take a look at it, is anything standing out to you?

He intentionally leaves off the exterior doorknob. The door only opens from the inside. Jesus doesn't force entry — He waits to be let in.

Verse 21 — The Reward

"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." (ESV)

Even to this most rebuked of all seven churches, Jesus holds out the greatest of all seven rewards: **a shared throne**. Not a lesser inheritance — the **same** inheritance as every overcomer in every other letter.

In the next chapter we will talk about thrones -- but is Jesus on his throne now? No He is not, he is on the Father's throne --- He gets his throne when He returns. Not only a promise but a prophecy of what is to come.

Get to go into the throne room of the universe and see what is happening!

NT Connection: *Romans 8:17 — "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."*

OT Connection: *Daniel 7:9, 13-14 — the throne room vision, where "the Ancient of Days" is seated and "one like a son of man" is given dominion and a kingdom. Jesus's language of sitting down with the Father on His throne draws directly on this Danielic throne imagery.*

Verse 22 — The Universal Call

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." (ESV)

The same closing refrain from all seven letters. What was spoken to a specific first-century congregation is now addressed to **every** church, in every age — including ours.

7 times in the book and 7 times in the Gospels.

The Prophetic Picture: Laodicea and the End of the Church Age

On the church-history timeline, Laodicea (like Philadelphia) runs from roughly **1900 to the present**, and both continue right up to the rapture/tribulation. Two streams, diverging at the turn of the 20th century:

How the Divergence Happened

1. **Liberal theology in Europe** — German theologians like Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack began denying the full inerrancy of Scripture.
2. **Harry Emerson Fosdick**, in a 1922 sermon to the Northern Baptist Convention, argued for "the tolerance of diverse belief" over what he called fundamentalist "intolerance" — a public marker of the liberal turn in American Protestantism.
3. **The Ivy League drift** — schools founded explicitly as Christian institutions (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Brown, Penn, Cornell, Dartmouth) gradually abandoned that founding vision under the influence of Enlightenment philosophy (Descartes, Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, Kant) and, later, Darwinism, Marx, Freud, and others.
4. **The convergence** — liberal academia and liberal theology fed each other, producing a stream of the church that is Christian in name only: tolerating/celebrating sin under a banner of "love" rather than addressing it under truth and grace, redefining marriage and sexuality, abandoning a pro-life ethic, replacing the gospel with social causes, and drifting toward universalism.

This is **the apostate church** — pseudo-believers, not genuine ones. It goes through the tribulation, because it was never the true church to begin with (cf. Matthew 7:22-23, "I never knew you").

Scripture Predicted This

- **Matthew 24:10** — "many will turn away from the faith and betray one another"
- **1 Timothy 4:1** — "in later times some will depart from the faith, devoting themselves to deceitful spirits"
- **2 Timothy 4:3** — "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but... will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions"

Both/And, Not Either/Or

A falling away *and* a great awakening can happen at the same time. History suggests we're due for another Great Awakening even as this apostate stream widens. Our call is to stay planted in the Philadelphia stream — evangelical, gospel-centered, unashamed of the truth of Scripture — while the Laodicean stream drifts further from it.

Discussion Questions for the Group

1. Jesus has *zero* commendation for Laodicea — the only church of the seven with no good word said about it. What does it look like for a man's walk with Christ to go "lukewarm" without him even noticing?
 2. Laodicea's self-sufficiency ("I have need of nothing") came directly out of their material prosperity. Where in your life has success or stability made you *less* dependent on God, not more?
 3. Jesus offers gold, garments, and eye salve — all things Laodicea already thought they had. What's the modern equivalent in your own life — something you think you already possess that Christ says you actually lack?
 4. Verse 19 says discipline is proof of love, not rejection. Has God ever disciplined you in a way that felt harsh in the moment but you can now see was an act of love?
 5. Verse 20 pictures Christ knocking at the door of His *own* church, waiting to be let back in. Are there areas of your life — habits, priorities, relationships — where you've quietly shut the door on Him without meaning to?
 6. How do you personally discern the difference between legitimate compassion/tolerance and the kind of compromise that drifts toward the "apostate" pattern described in this study?
 7. What's one concrete step of "zeal and repentance" (v. 19) you can take this week?
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Summary Table: All Seven Letters

Church	Title of Christ	Commendation	Complaint	Reward
Ephesus	Holds the seven stars	Hard work, discernment	Left first love	Tree of life
Smyrna	First and last, was dead and lived	Endures persecution	None	Crown of life
Pergamos	Sharp two-edged sword	Holds fast the name	Tolerates false teaching	Hidden manna, white stone
Thyatira	Son of God, eyes like fire	Love, faith, service	Tolerates Jezebel	Authority over nations
Sardis	Seven Spirits, seven stars	A few remain faithful	Dead works	White garments, book of life
Philadelphia	Holy, true, key of David	Kept His word	None	Pillar in God's temple
Laodicea	The Amen, faithful & true witness	None	Lukewarm, self-sufficient	Shared throne