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Revelation #12

**The Church that makes Jesus Sick**  
**Revelation 3:14-22**

I've lived in nine cities. I was born in Shawnee, Oklahoma, from which we moved when I was ten to settle in Midland, Texas. I attended high school in Duncan, Oklahoma, and went to college in Norman. My wife and I lived in Dallas, Texas, for twelve years, and then moved back to Oklahoma, this time to Ardmore, in 1985. Since then we've lived in Kansas City, Chicago, once again in Kansas City and now OKC.

I'm grateful for what I experienced in each city. I'm not sure the same could be said for our seventh and final city in Revelation 2-3. Whether or not the citizens of ancient Laodicea were proud of their home town or ashamed of its failures is impossible to know. But of one thing we may be sure, ***it had massive spiritual problems and called forth the most stringent and stinging rebuke yet issued by our Lord.*** The severity of this letter is unmistakable, as is also the absence of a single word of praise or commendation. This city, this church, and this letter are the most famous (infamous?) of the seven. A brief introduction to Laodicea, therefore, will prove beneficial in our study of the letter addressed to it.

The courier who had been entrusted by the apostle John with the seven letters to the seven churches neared his journey's end. Having embarked from the island of Patmos with the book of Revelation securely tucked away in his messenger's pouch, he would have begun his travel along the circular route by first visiting Ephesus. Moving northward he would pass through the cities of Smyrna and Pergamum, at which point, turning southeast, his journey would lead him to Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia. Finally, having come almost full circle along the well-beaten trade route, he would arrive at his final destination: Laodicea.

Laodicea was perhaps the wealthiest city in all of Phrygia. It was a city known not simply for its monetary success (it was a banking center) but for its linen and wool industry (especially black sheep!), as well as its medical school. Probably the most famous medicinal product to come out of Laodicea was an eye ointment made from a powder produced in Phrygia.

We don't know how or when the gospel came to Laodicea. Paul most likely never visited the church but he did pray for it (Col. 2:1) and he went out of his way to make certain that his epistle to the Colossians be read to the congregation. As if that weren't enough, Paul even wrote a letter to the Laodiceans! He refers to it in Colossians 4:16 as "the letter from Laodicea," leading some to believe it was a letter written *to Paul* by the Laodicean church, or perhaps by its leadership, or even one of its members. But it's more likely that Paul has in mind a letter from him, currently in the possession of the Laodiceans, written to them, that he now wants read to the church in Colossae.

We don't know what happened to this letter, but it's possible that it was destroyed in the massive earthquake that hit the region in 61 a.d. But that's only speculation. You shouldn't be bothered by this, given the fact that Paul most likely wrote four (!) letters to the Corinthian church, only two of which are included in our canon of inspired Scripture (see 1 Cor. 5:9-11, a reference to the letter written in 54 a.d., now lost; and 2 Cor. 2:4,9, a reference to the letter written in the summer of 55 a.d., often called the "severe" or "tearful" letter, also now lost).

We have no idea why God chose not to preserve these and other apostolic writings for the church of subsequent generations. Evidently once they served their divinely designed function for the early church, God sovereignly arranged for their disappearance or destruction. In his infinite and gracious wisdom he determined that the content of those epistles was not essential for the life and faith of the church beyond the first century. Ultimately we must trust in divine providence and believe that God has preserved for us everything that is necessary for a life of truth and godliness.

### *Jesus is the Amen!*

Of the three things said about Jesus in v. 14, I want to focus on only two. Note well: Jesus *doesn't* just *say* "Amen," he *is* "the Amen"! He himself is the validation, the ratification, the confirmation, the authentication of all that God has said and promised he will do for his children.

"Amen!" was the biblical way of making known, "Yes! I agree! By all means! So be it! Undoubtedly so! Yep! Absolutely!" When the people of God heard the word of God they typically responded with "Amen!" as a way of making it unmistakably clear: "We participate with you in declaring this to be so. There is an echo in our hearts to what you say. This truth reverberates loudly in our souls."

When we come to Revelation 3:14 this glorious declaration of affirmation is elevated even higher, for here it becomes one of the *names* of Jesus Christ himself (cf. Isa. 65:16)! So much is this a reflection of his character and wholly consistent with his nature that he is properly named "the Amen"!

So, what does this mean to you and me? How does it serve to heighten our confidence and deepen our assurance and drive out the doubts that so often plague us? Look closely with me at Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 1:20. There we're told that "all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory."

Whatever God has promised to us, whether by way of covenant stipulation or stated intent, regardless of the context or time, no matter how unrealistic or far-fetched it may at first appear, *will* come to pass because of who Christ is and what he has done. He is the "Amen!" to all God has said he will do. This is true not simply because Jesus adds his personal word of confirmation

or stamps it with his seal of approval. It is true because he actually secures it and effectually brings it to pass by virtue of his death and resurrection. Whatever obstacles may have stood in the way of God's promises coming true, such as our sin and Satan's power, have been overcome by the blood of the Lamb!

*Jesus, the Sovereign Lord over the New Creation*

On this point I'll be brief. The title "beginning of the creation of God" does not mean that Jesus is himself a created being, but rather that he is the source, cause, or the one through whom creation occurs. In fact, this phrase likely refers not to Jesus' sovereignty over the first or original creation (although he is surely that!), but points to his resurrection as demonstrating that he is the inauguration or cause of and the sovereign ruler over the **new creation** that is described in Revelation 21-22.

*Lukewarm*

Our Lord's diagnosis of the problem in Laodicea is two-fold. He first discerns a moral and religious tepidity in the church, a lukewarmness that borders on outright indifference to the things of God and a life of godliness. Second, he traces this to a prideful self-sufficiency (v. 17).

To come straight to the point, Christianity at Laodicea was flabby and anemic! Our Lord uses the language of "cold," "hot," and "lukewarm" What does he mean by this?

People have typically believed that by "hot" Jesus is referring to zealous, lively, passionate, hard-working Christians, and that by "cold" he is referring to lifeless, unregenerate pagans, devoid of any spiritual life whatsoever. *Hot*, so goes the argument, refers to spiritually active believers whereas *cold* refers to apathetic unbelievers. But this creates the problem of Jesus appearing to say he would rather they be in utter unbelief than in a backslidden, lukewarm, albeit still saved, condition.

The key to making sense of this comes from an understanding of certain features of the **topography** of the land in which the Laodiceans found themselves. Laodicea lacked a natural water supply and was dependent on its neighbors for this vital resource. This, I believe, explains the imagery in this remarkable passage.

In all likelihood, "hot" and "cold" don't refer to the spiritual "temperature" or religious "mood" or "attitude", as it were, of the believer and the unbeliever, as has traditionally been thought. Rather, the word "hot" refers to the well-known **medicinal waters of Hierapolis** (six miles north of Laodicea), whose "hot springs" reached 95 degrees. The word "cold", on the other hand, points to the **refreshing waters of Colossae** (twelve miles east).

If this is what Jesus had in mind, the church is not being rebuked for its spiritual temperature but for the **barrenness** of its works. The church was providing neither **refreshment** for the spiritually

weary (portrayed through the imagery of “cold” water from Colossae), nor *healing* for the spiritually sick (portrayed through the imagery of “hot” water from Hierapolis). The church was simply ineffective.

If correct, this relieves the problem of why Christ would prefer the church to be “cold” rather than “lukewarm”. The church in Laodicea is rebuked, therefore, for the *useless and barren nature of its works, indicative of its stagnant spiritual condition*. “You’ve become of no benefit to anyone,” says Jesus, “and I will not stomach such behavior.”

The topography of the region also sheds light on his use of the word “lukewarm”. As the hot, mineral-laden waters from Hierapolis traveled across the plateau towards Laodicea, they gradually became lukewarm before cascading over the edge directly in view of the Laodicean populace. There are actually archaeological remains in Laodicea of an aqueduct system that would have carried water from Hierapolis. The people in Laodicea would have been keenly aware of the nauseating effect of drinking from that source.

“*That* is what you are like to me,” says Jesus. “When I look upon your lack of zeal, your indifference toward the needs of others, and your blasé response to my beauty, I feel like a man who has drunk tepid, tasteless water.” It’s difficult to rid one’s mind of the picture of Jesus lifting to his lips a cup of what he anticipates to be a flavorful and refreshing drink, only to regurgitate it in utter disgust.

Then there is the rather revolting image of Jesus spitting or vomiting the Laodicean church out of his mouth. Notwithstanding the numerous threats of discipline and judgment throughout these seven letters, there’s something about Jesus being sickened to the point of vomiting his people out of his mouth that strikes us as uncharacteristically unseemly. Does the “spitting” / “spewing” / “vomiting” of such people from his mouth suggest that all hope is lost for their salvation and enjoyment of eternal fellowship with Christ? Not necessarily. This imagery, at minimum, indicates a serious threat of divine discipline. But there may yet be hope through repentance and obedience.

### *Their Misguided Self-Awareness*

Why was it so important for the Laodiceans to understand their spiritual plight? Why was Jesus so concerned that the blinders of self-deception and self-sufficiency be stripped away and they see and sense their utter and absolute dependence on him for all they are and have? The answer is simply that God will not tolerate any attitude in us or activity by us that in any way detracts from his glory.

“I am the Lord; that is my name; *my glory I give to no other*” (Isaiah 42:8).

“*My glory I will not give to another*” (Isaiah 48:11b).

The self-sufficient, self-congratulatory, self-aggrandizing, self-promoting pomp and pride of the Laodiceans was not something Jesus would long tolerate. No one, not the Laodiceans, not you or I or the most magnificent mega-church on the earth will be permitted to detract from God's glory or take credit for what he has accomplished.

Tragically, the Laodiceans had grown religiously plump and proud of themselves, blind to their desperate need for what only Christ can supply. "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17).

Our Lord's use of terms in this passage points to a deliberate contrast on his part between the church at Smyrna and that of Laodicea. Smyrna suffered from material poverty (*ptocheia*) but was regarded by Jesus as spiritually wealthy (*plousios*). Laodicea, on the other hand, was materially wealthy (*plousios*) but spiritually poor (*ptocheia*). Thus, ***despite their banks, they were beggars! Despite their famous eye-salve, they were blind! Despite their prosperous clothing factories, they were naked!***

Part of what it means to be spiritually lukewarm is to be smug, complacent, satisfied with the spiritual status quo, at rest with one's progress in the Christian life, with little or no self-awareness, little or no recognition that all is of God and his Christ. To be lukewarm is to live as if what you presently know and experience of Christ is enough. No need or desire to press in further. No need or desire to seek after God. Little or no longing to pray and fast. Little or no longing to break free of sin. Satisfied with the current depth of delight in the Spirit. Satisfied with the current extent of knowledge of the Father. The Laodiceans were content with life as it was and not in the least ashamed or hesitant to take full credit for what little they had achieved.

They took stock in their spiritual assets and evaluated their religious portfolio and felt rich and prosperous and in need of nothing, not even what God might give. Our Lord's assessment was of another sort. "You're spiritually bankrupt," he said, "and morally wretched and visually impaired and shamefully exposed. You have no grasp of your utter dependence on me for life and forgiveness and hope and joy and understanding and righteousness."

But there's still hope, if only they'll listen and learn from "what the Spirit says to the churches". Says Jesus: "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" (Rev. 3:18).

Lukewarm, professing Christians, though poor and bereft of spiritual resources can still cash in on the only currency that counts, now and in eternity: pure gold, refined by Jesus himself. Those plagued by moral nakedness and the shame of exposure can yet be adorned in clothing that may

not qualify as “fashion” in today’s world but is more than adequate to provide covering and a standing before a God who sees through every outward façade. And those blinded by a false sense of self-importance, who fancy themselves enlightened and “on the cutting edge”, may yet submit to an ophthalmic physician whose healing salve strips the scales from our darkened vision and brings clarity of sight to behold the beauty of the King.

Continuing to draw on imagery derived from their own commercial activities, Jesus counsels them to make several purchases in those areas where they fancy themselves self-sufficient. He likens himself to a merchant who visits the city to sell his wares and competes with other salesmen. “I advise you,” he says, “to forsake your former suppliers and come trade with me.”

True spiritual wealth, the sort that cannot rust or be stolen or suffer from a Wall Street crash or plummeting interest rates, is the “gold” that is purified of all dross and rid of every alloy by the refining fires of suffering (cf. Job 23:10; Prov. 27:21; Mal. 3:2-3; 1 Pt. 1:6-9). This is the “gold” of knowing Christ, enjoying Christ, savoring Christ, treasuring Christ, prizing Christ, and finding in him alone the fullness of joy that will never fade or lose its capacity to please.

There is an obvious paradox here, for how can “poor” people purchase a commodity as expensive as gold? You do so with the only currency that counts in God’s presence: *need*. The coin of the realm is *desperation*. We don’t pay him out of our resources but from an acknowledgment of the *depths of our abject poverty*. The price God requires is that faith in him which humbly concedes that one has nothing with which to bargain, nothing with which to trade, nothing with which to make so much as a meager down payment.

For people living in first-century Laodicea, the imagery would have evoked an unmistakable contrast in their minds between the famous and profitable “black” wool from the sheep in Laodicea and the “white” woolen garments essential to their spiritual lives.

Finally, they are desperately in need of the restoration of their spiritual vision. The founder of the medical school at Laodicea was a famous ophthalmologist named Demosthenes Philalethes. As helpful as his remedies might be for the physical eye, only Jesus can apply that soothing, healing, restorative salve that enables us to behold and enjoy beauty that never fades or fails.

Revelation 3:19 is nothing short of shocking. Earlier in v. 16 Jesus expressed disgust towards those in Laodicea, declaring that he is on the verge of vomiting them out of his mouth. Yet now, in v. 19, he affirms his love for them! May I boldly suggest that it is *precisely because he loves his people* that he refuses to tolerate their lukewarm indifference toward spiritual matters? In other words, the harsh words in this letter, the firm discipline evoked by their backslidden

behavior, together with the strong counsel (v. 18) that they “be zealous and repent” (v. 19) are all motivated by our Lord’s love for his own!

If you’re looking for an explanation of our Lord’s posture in relation to Laodicea, you need go no farther than Revelation 3:19. He says and does what we read in this letter because of his loving commitment to them! “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

There’s no escaping the fact that *sometimes love hurts*. I don’t mean that it hurts because we love someone who fails to love us back (although, of course, that’s often true). I’m talking about God’s love. Sometimes, because God is love, you will hurt. His discipline is often uncomfortable and painful.

Consider the words of Solomon in Proverbs 3:11-12, the passage to which Jesus obviously alludes in Revelation 3:19 – “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.”

It was a hard lesson for the Laodiceans to learn. Whether or not they eventually grasped this truth and did what Jesus commanded (“be zealous and repent”) remains a mystery. The only remaining and relevant question is whether *we* will embrace the discipline of our loving Lord and run to him, rather than from him, when we sin.

### *Jesus at the Door*

Next to John 3:16, this is perhaps the most famous evangelistic passage in the New Testament. The question is, Should it be? To this lukewarm and backslidden church, Jesus issues this stunning 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” (Rev. 3:20).

As noted, most people simply assume this is an evangelistic appeal to non-Christians to open *the door of their hearts* and invite Jesus in to save and forgive them. Let me say first of all that if you came to saving faith in Christ in response to the use of this passage in an evangelistic presentation, praise God! The fact that this text was, in all likelihood, used in a way inconsistent with its original intent in no way invalidates the spiritual life God graciously imparted to you through it.

There's one more thing to note before we proceed. Colin Hemer has pointed out that Jesus has once again drawn on imagery familiar to the people of Laodicea in order to make his point, for the city was situated foursquare on one of the most important road junctions in Asia Minor. Each of the four city gates opened on to a busy trade route. The inhabitants of Laodicea, therefore, "must have been very familiar with the belated traveler who 'stood at the door and knocked' for admission" (204).

The most likely view, is that the invitation is addressed to *backslidden, unrepentant believers* who, in their self-sufficiency, had excluded (indeed, excommunicated) the risen Lord from their congregational and personal lives. But in an expression of indescribable condescension and love Jesus asks permission to enter and re-establish fellowship with his people, a fellowship portrayed in the imagery of a feast in which Christ and Christians share.

One final view to consider is eschatological in nature. This interpretation says that the invitation (v. 20) has a *future* fulfillment. It is addressed to backslidden believers in the church at Laodicea and pertains to Christ's second coming. *The door at which Jesus stands is a metaphor for the imminence of his return* (cf. James 5:9). Those who are prepared and alert to receive their Savior at his coming will enjoy intimate communion with him in the messianic feast of the age to come. This view links v. 20 with v. 21 and the promise of co-regency in the future kingdom.

Thus the appeal of v. 20 is not to unbelievers so that they might be saved. Rather it is an appeal to individuals ("anyone") within the church to repent and forsake their spiritual half-heartedness. As a result one may experience *now* the intimate communion and fellowship of which the feast in the messianic kingdom is the *consummation*. All present fellowship with Jesus is a foretaste of that eternal felicity which will be consummated in the age to come.

### *Enthroned with Jesus!*

Listen to Revelation 3:21 again. Listen closely.

Perhaps this promise would rest more easily in my heart if it weren't for the fact that Revelation 4-5 follow immediately on this concluding letter to the church at Laodicea. You see, when I pause to reflect on what Christ meant when he referred to his "throne", a throne on which his people, together *with him*, will sit, I can't help but be drawn into the majestic scene that follows in the subsequent two chapters.

What we see and hear and feel in Revelation 4-5 is the pinnacle of biblical revelation. There simply is no greater, more majestic, or breathtaking scene than that of the risen Lamb sitting on the throne, surrounded by adoring angels and odd creatures, with ear-popping peals of thunder and blinding bolts of lightning.



If my earlier discomfort was due to the seeming impropriety of sinners sitting on that throne, nothing is more proper or fitting or apropos than that Jesus should be there. Nothing makes more sense than that he should be the focus of all creation, whether of Elders falling down, mesmerized by his beauty, or strange animals singing endlessly of his holiness. He belongs on the throne! He alone is God! He has died and redeemed men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation! By all means, let us sing:

***“Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne.***

Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own.

Awake, my soul, and sing, of Him who died for thee,

And hail Him as thy matchless King through all eternity.”

***“Crown Him the Lord of Heaven, enthroned in worlds above,***

Crown Him the King to Whom is given the wondrous name of Love.

Crown Him with many crowns, as thrones before Him fall;

Crown Him, ye kings, with many crowns, for He is King of all” (George J. Elvey)

Yes, he is the Lord of Heaven (and earth) and is rightly “enthroned in worlds above.” But what, for heaven’s sake, are *we* doing there? More shocking still, what are the *Laodiceans* doing there? And what, for heaven’s sake, will the twenty-four Elders think? What will be the reaction of the four living creatures, not to mention the myriads of angelic beings who surround the throne, pouring forth wave upon wave of endless praise? Will they not be shocked and scandalized to see sinners there? I would be!

We must be very careful and theologically precise on this point. We are not enthroned with Christ because we *are* Christ, as if salvation entails the merging of our being with his in such a way that he is less than the Creator or that we are more than creatures. Our union with him is vital and glorious but he is always the one and only living Lord and we are redeemed sinners who depend on him not only now but for all eternity.

We are not enthroned with him because we will have been *deified*, as if we will have left behind our humanity and been transformed into divinity. We are not enthroned because we are God but because he is! Although we will be “made like him” (1 John 3:2; Phil. 3:21), gloriously devoid of all sinful impulses, our presence on his throne is a gift, not a right. ***We are there not by nature or deed but by grace alone***, having been made co-heirs by him who alone is worthy of worship.

Having said all that, I’m still a bit incredulous when it comes to this promise in Revelation 3:21-22 (cf. Rev. 2:26-27). But at least I know why I’m enthroned with him, and why not. I’m there because he died for me and poured out the love of God into my heart through the Spirit who was given to me (Rom. 5:5). I’m there because of mercy, not merit. I’m there to share his rule, not usurp it. I’m there to exercise an authority that is rightfully his and derivatively mine.

I don't expect ever fully to understand what this promise means or entails. Its shape is still uncertain to me. What it will feel like is yet foreign. Its plausibility confronts me like an insurmountable mountain peak. That Christ Jesus should ever make room within his reign for a scurrilous sinner like me is no doubt a theme that will occupy my thoughts and inquiries for all eternity. As for now, I don't know what else to say but, "Thank you, Lord!"