

Laodicea

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[0 : 00] I'm going to ask Tom up shortly again to read. I'm not going to read the passage quite yet. I want to introduce it first. We've been doing for those who may be visiting with us this evening.

We've been doing a series in the evening worship on the seven churches in Revelation. We come to the last one this evening, the church in Laodicea. Now some of you who may or may not be interested in football, I'm sorry, I know it's the only illustrations ever used. I can't do horse riding ones. But there's a very famous video clip.

Well, if you're interested in football, from a number of years ago when there was an English player, well he was a Scotsman, but he was playing in the English league and his name was Duncan Ferguson, and he had brutally assaulted an opponent on the pitch. And there was chaos in the pitch. And Duncan Ferguson, who was a big strapping lad from Dundee, was just standing aloof from it all. And one of the players in the opposite team, Jimmy Bullard, looks, he's a much smaller man, and he just looks up at Duncan Ferguson with a kind of look of awe and fear, and a kind of smiling disbelief at what he had just done. Because it was really completely out of the box and not the kind of thing that you should do in a football park. And it's become quite an iconic picture or video of this guy, Jimmy Bullard, looking up with awe and fear, and just this odd sort of smiling disbelief at what Duncan Ferguson had done. And that is exactly the kind of response that I have when I read this letter of Christ to the church in Laodicea.

It's absolutely dramatic. It's a brutal tongue lashing from Jesus Christ. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, gives this absolute verbal leathery to the church in Laodicea.

There's nothing like it in the whole Bible. And it's with a sense of awe and fear and kind of smiling disbelief that I read this passage as it is given to this church. Now just before reading it, I want to lay out a couple of ways, a couple of bits of introduction. First again, as is, as with the case in all the other letters of the revelation to the different churches, Christ gives his credentials for saying what he has to say. And these are, he says, the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

[2 : 56] Christ is reminding this church that he is the Amen. When do we say the Amen? We say it at the end of the sermon or at the end of the prayer. It's, he's the last word on truth. When he speaks, we needn't have anyone speak after it. That is the Amen. He has spoken and he is reminding this church and us of who he is. When he speaks, nobody contradicts what he has to say. He is the Amen.

He's the last word in truth. And he is the faithful and true one himself, the true and faithful witness, the one who has a weighty testimony, who has something worth listening to, who has the weight of his crucifixion or his incarnation, his crucifixion, his resurrection, his ascension behind him. But more than that, the beginning of God's creation, this great power we read at the beginning of the service of the beginning of the word of God. In the beginning was the word and the word was with God. And then we came to the end of the word, the Bible as well.

And this is the Christ who is speaking here, flexing his authority, his spiritual muscles before this people. There was a great danger that they would dismiss this Christ, as we will maybe learn a little bit about them. And Christ is saying that he is coming to them with great authority and with great truth and with something that they must listen to, something that they must hear what he has to say. He goes on to say, I know, as he does in the other letters, I know your works.

Again, as he gives his credentials, he's wanting them to appreciate and know who he is. That he is an intimate knowledge of this church. But he wants them to learn from what he is saying, because along with this intimate knowledge of them, he reveals, as we will go on to see, his intimate knowledge of their city and of their lifestyle and of what made them a great city.

And he does so in pictures, because he wants to get their attention. He wants them to know that he knows who he is and that he knows their situation. Now, just as a very brief aside, I think that's a very important principle in preaching, in teaching the truth, or in giving of your testimony. It's not simply that we blurt out a set of facts to people in our preaching or in our teaching of God's word or in our sharing of testimony. It's not simply that we give them a formulaic, I was lost, I came to Christ, now I see, I was blind and so on, an ABC step of factual truth. If we take Christ's example here, it's important for us, and young preachers here, it's important for you to know and learn that you're not giving a lecture, that you're not simply passing on information, that you have a passion and a longing for the people in front of you, not the people somewhere else, but the people in front of you to grasp, to click, to hear, to respond, because you speak into their lives, you speak the truth and apply the truth into their situation, and you show a familiarity and a longing to impart truth to them in such a way that they will understand. That means that we must know people, means we must be interested in the culture in which we live, it means we must be prayerful, and it means we must put a great deal of effort into not just our preaching and teaching, but into our testimony, into the sharing of our faith. It isn't formulaic, the people we speak to will be different each time, and we need to somehow, by the grace of God and by His power, of course, which we know He must use to open the door of their heart, but we must seek to be used by Him to do so. So Christ gives His credentials, and He sets out what He has to say in a way that they will know that He knows. And He's speaking to this church, what I'm calling lovely Laodicea, this church, the last of the churches, and they regard themselves as being rich. I am rich, the church says of itself, and indeed they were a rich people, it was a rich city. The historians tell us it was a place of great commerce, a place that was famed for its medical professional abilities. They produced an eye salve that was called the frigia powder, which was supposed to have great medicinal healing powers. They produced a black glossy wool that was famed in the region for being unique to Laodicea.

[8 : 24] They were a successful city, they were a successful people, they were a proud people, they were an independent people, they had been rocked by an earthquake and they built the city, rebuilt the city themselves, they didn't use any money from the Roman Empire to rebuild their city, they were self-sufficient. And it seemed, under Christ, that the church reflected that same kind of attitude. They were well resourced, they were content with themselves as a church, they were doing well, they were socially mobile, they had great gatherings, they sung great songs together, God blessed them as a church, they loved coming together and God was favouring them as they just went about their own business. They just came together, they didn't seem to be a people and a gathering who were persecuted, they didn't find themselves in any way intention with the world and the culture in which they lived, they were simply reflecting that culture, they were rich, they were doing well, their church was doing well, God was blessing them, everything was rosy in their spiritual garden. So can you imagine this scenario? They got a notice from their leaders saying, it's your turn. They'd heard about the letters that had gone out to the other churches in the area of Asia and finally the apostle John with this letter given to him by the Holy Spirit had a message for the church in Laodicea, it was their turn and it was going to be a special Sunday,

Sunday evening, six o'clock, all come round and the letter will be read out. Listen to what God is going to say to our church, they'd heard that he'd been speaking to the other churches, some commendations, some challenges, some rebukes and they were looking forward to what God would say to their rich church, to their blessed church, to their happy church and so they wouldn't miss that service. It was a night, they would definitely be in church, they were going to reschedule the dinner party they were planning, they would have their Louis Vuitton bag and they would take it along to church and they would have their lattes with them and they would scrap the golf club meeting that they were going to go to, they would buy some prosecco that they would have in the balcony after church which they would just discuss the wonderful encouraging words that the Lord God would say to them after the service and so the elder gets up and he's ashen faced and he reads the letter that God has for them in Laodicea. Tom's going to read it.

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea, right. The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation. I know your works, you're neither hot nor cold. Would that you are either cold or hot, so because you're lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say I'm rich, I've prospered and I need nothing, not realising that you're wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. 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. 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.

You who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Thanks, Tom. So can you imagine that in the light of what they expected? This is a message that has no commendation and it's entirely not what they expected from God as God challenges them.

And we must remember not just to listen to this as if it's a history lesson of a church from 2000 years ago. It's the living word of God. Each of the churches that we have reflect different aspects of different churches and different attitudes that we might have today and so we listen humbly under God's word for ourselves. But you can imagine the deathly silence that descends, the deathly hush that descends upon that gathering that evening. This is the Amen.

[13:48] This is the first and the last. This is the sovereign Creator. God and he, what does he say? He says, you make me sick. You make me sick. It's very politely put in the version that we have.

I'll spit you out of my mouth. I will vomit you out of my mouth. You make me sick is what he says to this church. It's simply, it isn't what they expected from God. You're neither hot nor cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot. So because you're lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you, spew you out of my mouth. Laodicea was was reputed to have bad water.

The water wasn't very drinkable. Hierapolis just further up the road had tremendous hot springs that were used for medicinal purposes and Colossae and the other side of them at the coast had cold, pure water that they used for drinking. So they knew about this picture too of unpalatable drinking water and God is basically saying because you're lukewarm, because you're neither one thing nor the other, you're actually you create sickness, spiritual sickness, you're useless to God, you provoke rejection in God rather than being healing or refreshing.

Neal spoke about that this morning about Ephesians reminding us that in Christ our whole lives are changed so that we our lives become spiritually useful and wholesome in whatever field or aspect of our life that is reflected in and what Jesus is saying here. He's saying your Christian church, your individual Christianity is useless. It neither heals nor refreshes.

It doesn't bring anyone to Christ. It isn't positive. It isn't good. It is neither one thing or the other. You are a compromised people. You just look exactly like the community in which you live. There is no difference between you in any shape or form. There isn't the transformation that the gospel should bring. You make me sick. And it's a very powerful picture of God's vision because he knows and our shallow sometimes understanding of all things being well in our hearts and lives. You make me sick. He goes on to say that in reality, though you feel that you're rich and mature as Christians, you have no spiritual discernment. You may be successful in business. You may be climbing the social ladder. You may be doing well in the eyes of the world and in your business and in your neighborhood. But spiritually, the discernment that I look for isn't there. You're a proud, self-made, successful people, but spiritually you're immature.

[17:19] You're not growing in grace and being transformed and being counter-cultural in the way that would transform laity. That would transform your marriages. That would transform your business.

That would transform your neighborhoods because you have compromised and are going along with the world in which you live rather than living differently. Now here Jesus, when he speaks to them, he doesn't argue from a powerfully intellectual basis, nor does he argue from a powerfully theological one, although that underpins everything. He uses simple pictures to express deep truth to them. I think that's very significant. This was an intelligent, successful, high-flying people, but he uses simple pictures that link into their lives and into their commerce and into their thinking that they would understand. He talks about them and says, you say, I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing. They don't need God. Not realizing that you're wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. He says, you have great wealth, but I regard you as spiritual beggars. The people you walk and pass every day on the street, well that's how I regard you spiritually. The beggars that look for money to survive, poverty stricken, to be pitied. That is how the amen looks at you in your lives.

You are not those who are independent and self-made spiritually and you're in great danger of losing what matters. The richness that you crave is not spiritual richness and your heart's desires

and longings and appetites are enslaved to materialism and your identity is in the wrong place. Your riches are misplaced. You're equating your physical riches and abilities with your spiritual condition and he says that has never been what you should think spiritually. And so there's this great sense in which he's giving them the complete opposite of what they think themselves.

They regarded themselves as a visionary church, a church to be followed, a church that God would bless, a church that is an example to other churches. God calls them blind in this city of eye salve and healing. He says they are blind. They themselves provide no example and no vision and no hope for any other church or any other individuals. They themselves are spiritually stumbling. They are independent, living for their own means and they are not relying on Christ and God so they can never be an example or an illustration or a visionary body for others.

They regarded themselves as being a people who spiritually and culturally and as a church were the height of fashion along with their commerce and their abilities and their black wool and Jesus says to them that you may feel that you have the best material and the best commerce and the best clothes but I regard you spiritually as naked. You have nothing before me. You've exposed, it's shameful, it's an embarrassment and it's they are on the edge of disaster in their lives.

[21 : 23] Now that is a powerfully dynamic, damning message that Jesus Christ brings. There's nothing really in that message to encourage and build them up. It's a message for the church as a whole and for the individuals within the church who weren't living a counter-cultural Christian life.

They were dead fish, dead fish going with the flow. Okay, that's late to see you, that's a long time ago. What are the living principles that we can take for a passage like this for ourselves?

How can we see some of the dangers and some of the warnings and some of the challenges from a passage like this for our own lives and how can we respond in a way that Christ wanted this church to respond if we recognize some of these things in our lives? Well I think there's two things that we can learn. I'm sure there's many more than two things. Two things I want to highlight. First is the importance of listening to what God says, the opinion, the understanding that Christ has of our lives. I know he says to this church and that's what we must listen to as we open scripture and as we seek this ongoing living relationship with Christ we recognize that he knows and that he knows our hearts and that he is someone who will tell us exactly our spiritual condition. We crave everybody else's favor in our lives. You crave the favor of the people in the church, you crave your boss's favor, you crave your husband and wife's or favor, you crave the favor of your family and these are all good things but do we crave, do we consider and do we look for his verdict on our lives and do we allow scripture to be a mirror into our hearts because he can sometimes say things that are very brutal and very powerful and very awe-inspiring and it's easy for us to tame him and to make him somebody that whose opinion really is only to be considered when it meets and when it agrees with our own. It's possible for us in a church to be compromised, it's possible for us to be independent, to be close, to be socially integrated, to be of great fellowship with one another, to enjoy times of worship even together but to be spiritually tepid, to be neither hot nor cold, to in our Christian lives and as a Christian church neither provide refreshment nor healing from Christ in our own lives or in anyone else's lives because we are not dependent on him. We are virtual atheists in our lives, we can meet together like this but he says,

I know, I know you never rely on me, I know you never seek to be counter-cultural in what you do, I know these things and I know it can be that we look rich and we look good and we look successful even in spiritual terms we can do all that but what's always I think significant for us is authenticity isn't it and genuineness in our relationship before God that we are reliant on him and looking for his word, the light of his word to shine in the dark places that we have.

Don't pretend there's no dark places but we want his light to shine in the dark places so that we can be healed and made whole and be rich by his standard and in his verdict.

[25 : 22] So we listen to what he says and really that's a lifelong process of spiritual maturing isn't it, that we don't just listen to our neighbours or we don't just listen to society or we don't just listen to our own hearts, we listen to the Amen, the last word he has that. The second thing I think we can learn from this church and maybe from what Jesus says to them is the power of priorities, the power of the priorities we have in our lives. There is no doubt that this church, its heart was naked and it was blind and pitiful and poor because they had prioritised the wrong things. Church for them was a kind of added extra, it was the icing on the cake, it's great to be part of this church, it's a nice church, I love one another so much but their priority was wealth creation, their priority was fashion, was culture, was society, was doing well, was being independent, self-made people which is fine at

one level but can't be allowed to govern our spiritual vulnerability and our spiritual dependence on Christ because we are naked and blind and wretched and pitiful and poor without him in our lives. These were people who fed their appetites so that their hearts desired the wrong things and I think that's a very important point.

Sometimes we struggle with Jesus, we struggle with the gospel and we struggle with worship and we struggle with not compromising, we struggle with going against the tide because our hearts and our desires are for sinful things and we wonder why we don't love Jesus more. I think that's because we often are independent and we don't allow Jesus Christ to change, you know it's a miracle isn't it?

We can only, we have to be dependent as Christians because the Christian life is a miracle, it is supernatural, we don't naturally love him, we don't naturally follow him, we're not naturally spiritually rich, it comes from him and therefore we must be plugged into him and dependent on him and coming to him to change our hearts and as we do so and appreciate what he has done and who he is then we will find our hearts desires changing and our priorities changing. So this quite a lot recently from here, we will spend time on the things that matter to us, it reflects our hearts, we will spend time and we will want to spend time on the things that we love and when we recognize that we don't love Christ much we wouldn't spend much time with him and that's okay as long as it drives us back to him to change our desires, we can't do it ourselves but it's all geared to allowing us to go back to him independence on him. So the power of priorities, this church had their priorities all wrong and they they self-assessed and the self-assessed is rich, they didn't listen to Christ who knew them and knew them in their heart. Okay so we can learn these priorities as we finish then Christ's command to them because that's not the end of the story, Christ's command to them and to us if we find ourselves to a greater or lesser degree in that position is what we must finish with and apply in our own lives and the first thing we must do again is listen to him. In verse 19 he says after this verbal lashing he says to them I love you, those whom I love I reprove and discipline. This is not a rejection letter, this is to a Christian church lest we forget, this is to a church like ours, this is to believers and he says look I love you, now there's nothing, he says nothing good about them, it is an absolute bomb sight of a letter and yet he says I love you, I'm not rejecting you here, I love you but he doesn't just say I love you, he says turn your heads, don't stay the way you are, turn your heads round, those whom I love I reprove and discipline so be zealous or be earnest and repent, he wants them to change, he wants them to turn round, he wants them to be earnest and to look where, to look to the one who is able to give them gold, who is able to give them riches, the one who conquers, the one who will grant him to sit with me on my throne as I also conquered, come to him so that we will be rich, spiritually rich, repent, receive spiritual gold and that surely refers to returning to the cross to that place where Christ in all his poverty revealed the richness of his salvation and the beauty and the depth and the glory of what he then came to forgive, he came to redeem, he came to transform, he came to renew and he reminded them of that, counsel you, I counsel you to buy with me gold refined by fire, you know the salvage, the righteousness of Christ refined through the suffering of the cross and also he says to interestingly he says to them and wear white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness might not be seen and that was interesting for the Lady of Sains because white garments for them, interestingly because you know their great commercial success was black wool, white garments for them were the garments of death, it was the garments that people would put on dead bodies before they were put in the tomb so it had a kind of negative connotation and I think God,

Jesus knew exactly what he's saying when he's saying that, he said put on these white garments, the garments of my righteousness and yes that will require a dying, it will require you to die to self and to die to your ridiculous riches and your ridiculous self-importance and your ridiculous self-reliance and it will mean recognizing where your life comes from, you will he says to them in all your riches need to crucify your sinful nature and allow the Holy Spirit to transform you and that's the great message that we know and we recognize for ourselves and that daily but it doesn't matter who we are, really I think this ongoing deliberate conscious repentance turning, when did you last, do you think consciously repent, turn back to God, is this something that's part of your life, part of your Christian life, there's a daily, a constant turning back, constant recognition that he knows our hearts and there's a constant digging and taking away of the things that make you selfish and make me proud and arrogant and all the other things that I am, it's a way of life for us, this isn't just a

one-off request by Jesus, this is a way of life, listen I love you, turn your heads because I've provided for you, I give you the white clothes, I give you all you need to make you rich spiritually in my eyes and then he says and with this we finish, enjoy, I will grant with him to sit with me on my throne and to, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me, he says this is the latest scenes we're used to feasts and the word that's used here is the word for a feast, it's not the word for a snack, it's not the word for a lunch, it's the word for a, one of these great feasts that they have and Jesus said I'll come and feast with me, don't have your own kind of society feasts but come and sit in my kingdom, not the kind of gluttonous drunken celebrations that you're engaged in in Laodicea but this great feast in my company of joy and peace and identity and fulfillment and the unmistakable presence of Christ in your day-to-day life and the future hope of that new heavens and new earth that Neil was speaking about this morning, that's the great encouraging message of this most radical and brutal letter that we find in the whole of the Bible and Jesus is an extraordinary saviour, let's keep going back to him and let's be transformed, let's not be independent and let's not be rich in our own eyes and remind ourselves that it's not just our individual, what we think of ourselves as individuals but what we think of ourselves as Saint Columba and remember our great need of Christ, amen let's pray, Lord God help us to be like you, forgive us when we're not and how often we are not, we pray that you would humble us under your word, remind us that you're the great amen, that truth begun with you and truth ends with you and your truth from beginning throughout and remind us Lord God that you're the great Creator and the great sustainer that you've given us today, we're not guaranteed tomorrow but maybe use each day preciously and carefully and maybe do independence on you and may our humility stem from our understanding of our own hearts and the glorious, glorious provision of Jesus who wants to make us rich in Christ, who wants to clothe us and forgive us and renew us and redeem us and make us healing and refreshing in our own lives but also in the lives of others and for the city we pray that we be a church that refreshes by healing and renewing dependence on Jesus Christ, amen.