

Study Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (30-11-1997 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Letter to Laodicea

Revelation 3:14:22

Additional Bible reading: Colossians 1:3-8; 2:1; 4:16-18

Introduction

This is the last of the seven letters, and it is the sternest and most critical. Laodicea was 40 miles SE of Philadelphia, and 10 miles from Colosse. Antiochus of Syria founded the city in 250BC, and he named the city after his wife, Laodice. It was a very important and prosperous town, where several trade routes met. It was extremely rich, and needed no subsidy for the rebuild after the earthquake of 60AD. It was a banking centre and commercial centre. Cloth, garments and carpets were made from local sheep, which produced a soft, glossy wool.

There was a famous medical school there, which produced a famous ointment for eye problems, exported all over the world in tablet form. There were three theatres, a stadium, and gymnasium with baths. Plenty of “millionaires” lived in such a rich social and cultural place.

We do not know about the planting of the church there. It might have been by Epaphras. Paul mentions writing a letter to Laodicea, but that letter has not survived (unless it is our Ephesians). In his letter to the Colossians, he says he wants this letter to be sent on to the Laodiceans, and the letter to Laodicea to be read at Colosse. The Laodicean church was in a strategic position in an important town. They had a wonderful opportunity to count for God. So much good could have been done there. But the tragedy was that instead of influencing the world, it had been influenced by the world. Therefore it was hopelessly compromised, it had lost its testimony and its influence was nil.

The Laodicean church was not suffering from heretics or evildoers or persecutors. It was suffering from complacency. All the pride, self-satisfaction, complacency that was in the rich prosperous city went right through the Christian church as well. So the Head of the Church sends a very stern message. The letter contains much censure and condemnation. He does not have one good thing to say about the church.

Externally it was impressive, prosperous and powerful. Inwardly it was rotten, half-hearted, anaemic, flabby and compromised. Although in such a prosperous city, this church was the poorest of the seven, drifting and not driving. The letter makes an appeal to whole-heartedness. The term “Laodicean” has become equated with being lukewarm. And the skin-deep religiosity it displayed can alas be seen far too often in churches today.

The Lord’s indictment of the church

Christ introduces Himself as **Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation** (Revelation 3:14). Amen is the Hebrew word for assent. He is saying, “Brace yourself. Here is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” The last word was from Him, and there would be no appeal from His verdict. His words and

opinion were accurate, dependable and reliable. He tells them, not what they want to hear, but what they ought to hear.

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth (Revelation 3:15,16). This lukewarm church made Christ sick. He wanted to be ill when He thought of them. They were not infidels, but they were not earnest Christians. They did not oppose the Gospel, but neither did they defend it. They were not immoral, but their holiness was not outstanding. They were not godless, but they were not enthusiastic for God. They were not heretics, but neither were they zealous for the truth. They were not absent from church, but they only did the bare minimum. They were not prayerless, but there was no real love of it. They had not given up their profession of faith, but neither were they making any effort to live up to it. They liked the preacher if he was eloquent or clever, but not if he was too enthusiastic or challenging. They gave to the work, but not too much. They were active in the work, but there was no chance of them overdoing it. The Lord had some of their life, but not all of it. And all the time they were so pleased with themselves, smug and complacent. They were rich, and had need of nothing. Money was coming in, the building was in good order, there were no debts, they had the right equipment, numbers were good, the singing had never been better, and the organisation ran smoothly. What more could you ask for?

How we flatter and deceive ourselves. How tragic and how dangerous. A preacher can preach to a church like that, and they don't feel a thing. The rebukes glide off them like oil off marble. It is harder to work for a Christian church like that, which is lukewarm, than in a new work starting from scratch. How the world laughs as it looks on, and how the Lord weeps. There is a sense in which He is driven out of that church and He is standing outside trying to get in. Once He is outside, worship is hollow, communion is mere form, the Word is profitless, and the lukewarm church is no more than a religious club.

What of today? The biggest problem which most churches face is certainly not over-enthusiasm. John Wesley was criticized by the established church for being too enthusiastic! We are too anxious not to incur the world's displeasure and appear religious fanatics, so we play it down. The age we live in with its mental climate is against dogmatism and effort. The keywords today are comfort and compromise, and far be it from us to rock the boat!

He who loved us and gave Himself for us deserves better than lukewarm insipid compromise. If we let ourselves get to that stage, we will not only be despised by the world, but also be of no use to God. We will be a hindrance to those who do have zeal and earnestness.

We could learn something from General Booth of the Salvation Army. He became a red hot Salvationist by an infidel lecturer saying, "If I believed what you Christians believe, I would never rest day and night telling men about it." That sentence burned into Booth's conscience. He had a vision of Christ enthroned, and the fire in him was kindled. He became aflame for God, passionate.

There is urgent need in every church for courageous and robust people bringing to Christ their thoughtful and total commitment. This needs to be the case in both our public and private life. We need to be concerned for God's glory and to do His will. We must not insult Him with insipid compromise, which makes Him sick and reduces our profession to a joke.

The Lord's reaction to the church

The Lord cannot stand it when people who are His by name are insipid, anaemic and skin-deep. He would rather they were anything but lukewarm. This church was so blind, thinking all was well, and feeling pleased with itself. They had got everything – except zeal and warmth for the Lord. **You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked** (Revelation 3:17). They had none of the spiritual beauty that ought to adorn the church, and no real spiritual life. They were spiritual and moral beggars.

Then the mood changes. The Lord's patience and tenderness comes to the fore. **I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see** (Revelation 3:18). He speaks with affection, offering to make them rich in the spiritual sense, offering to clothe them with true righteousness, and to help them see spiritual truth. "Take from me, and I will enrich you, clothe you and heal you."

Whatever our spiritual condition – weak, backslidden or miserable – all we need can be found in Christ. He can turn paupers into princes. He brings forgiveness, cleansing, restoration, life and abundant life. The proud self-sufficient Laodiceans must come as needy beggars and find their sufficiency in Christ. Their need was great and only Christ could meet it.

He can deal with that sin, He can lead us into a deeper walk, He can banish that lukewarmness, and order our lives and map our future. He is the vine. When branches abide in Him, they will produce fruit. How foolish to be proud and self-sufficient. All we need is in Christ is we are humble enough to receive it.

The rebukes of Christ may be hard and sharp and uncomfortable, but He gives them because of His love. He urges us to be zealous and repent, to turn our backs on lukewarmness and turn to Him. We must spit these things out of our mouths before He spits us out of His mouth.

The Lord's promise to the church

So we come to that very famous and beloved verse: **Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me** (Revelation 3:20). This is often used as a Gospel text to challenge the unconverted. But originally it was applied to a backslidden, lukewarm church that in a sense had turned Christ out. They had everything in the church except Christ.

He speaks to the individuals here – “If anyone..”. The church is made up of individuals. When individuals return to the Lord, the church turns back to the Lord. The Lord offers to enter as a guest, but soon the guest becomes the host, and takes control. He does not want to become a lodger and servant in our hearts, but master and king. He wants the key to every room in the house: The key to the office and our business dealings; the key to the drawing room and our social life; the key to the kitchen and our daily tasks; the key to the library and the books we read; the key to the throne room where decisions are made. No step is to be taken without Him, and no action taken independently of Him.

We prefer to rule the roost, to be king of our own castle, and that is often the root cause of trouble, weakness and problems in our lives and our churches. He has to be the Master, sitting on the throne, ruling every department, and flying His flag above our house. He calls us into a new and deeper relationship with Him. Drastic changes will result. We cannot have His gifts unless we have His government. The enthronement of Christ is vital for every true Christian experience. We must surrender without terms. The whole personality has to be handed over.

He promises us that if He is in the right place in our lives, we shall share His throne, i.e. conquest and authority. This is the highest conceivable honour. Paupers to princes; rags to riches. If He sits at our table, we get to sit at His throne. If we dine with Him on earth, we will reign with Him in heaven.

William Booth was asked the secret of his life, to which he replied, “There came a day in my life when I asked God ‘Lord, you shall have all there is of William Booth’. And from that moment God has blessed me.”

Conclusion

Did the Laodicean church heed the warning? Certainly the city is no more. It was once prosperous, but now it is wasteland. Fragments of aqueducts and theatres are spread over vast extent of the country, speaking of former magnificence. But it has finished now, and the church in that place has finished. Either then or later the Lord and this church parted company for a last time.

And what of us? Where are we? Lukewarm, satisfied, smug, in need of nothing? Thank God that He does not treat us as we treat Him. He is not lukewarm about our salvation. He came from His throne in heaven to a stable in Bethlehem for our salvation. He was not lukewarm about the Gospel. He spent His life preaching it. He is not lukewarm about our forgiveness. He took our sins and poured out His life-blood. He is earnest about us. He is full of zeal for our interests. How we insult Him and reveal base ingratitude by lukewarmness. What an insult to treat so lightly what is so precious to Him. He does not deserve this treatment.

He is worthy of the highest and best place in our lives. Has He been knocking at the door of your heart, time and time again? Is He summoning you to repentance and total commitment? Open that door to Him now.