

Revelation 3:14-22 – Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

My first year out of high school, I rented an apartment with a guy I met at work.

We developed the classic, my half-your half of the apartment.

I tend to be something of a neat freak and he was a slob.

Consequently, the kitchen became a nightmare or piled up dirty dishes and moldy food.

He was notorious for leaving the refrigerator door open and food would spoil.

One morning I went to the refrigerator and pulled out my milk carton, walked to the counter and hoisted it to my lips.

I took a big mouthful and swallowed – and realized it was chunky!!!!!!

Sour Milk!

It's a good thing I was near the sink because my body's reaction was instantaneous – it all came back out!

Tonight, we're taking a look at a "Sour Milk Church," a church that made Jesus nauseous!

THE CHURCH THROUGH THE AGES

But before we get into our study of the Church of Laodicea, we are going to take a wider look at the message to *all seven churches* in chapters 2 & 3.

As we look at the list of churches given in 1:11, we ask, "Why was the Book of Revelation sent to these particular churches?"

There were many more than just these 7 – and many who should have been candidates to receive this volume from the Apostle John.

Why wasn't it sent to the Church at Rome, or Jerusalem – after all, these were the lead churches.

Why not Antioch, or Corinth or Philippi? Berea or Thessalonica, or Galatia?

And why not to Colossae; after all, it is next door to Laodicea and not far from Philadelphia.

Why does Jesus pick these 7 to send the letter to?

And even more importantly, why does He single each of them out to write a *personal word* of commendation and correction to?

This question has challenged Bible students since the Book was first delivered and many excellent minds have bent to try to answer it.

But it didn't become *clear* until the last century – though some early commentators *suggested* the reason why.

The main clue for exposing the mystery lies in the number of churches – 7!

Seven is the number of completion, of fulfillment.

And the order these churches are in forms a rough circle, following the path a postal carrier would have traveled; starting in Ephesus and proceeding to Laodicea.

A few early commentators suggested these seven churches represent the main epochs of church history from the ascension of Christ to His return.

As we now look *back* over 2000 years we can say with pretty great confidence that this view is solid, for the letters to the 7 churches do find application to the history of the church.

So, in interpreting chapters 2 & 3, it's wise to keep three things in mind –

1) The PRIMARY *meaning* of each letter is what it says to the church it's addressed to.

What Jesus said to Ephesus & Smyrna & Pergamos, and the rest *did* apply in a very specific way to them at the time they received the letter.

Interpreting the Bible as literally as the text allows demands that we understand the main and primary understanding of the text sees this addressed to a specific situation in each church.

2) But there's also a SECONDARY *application*, that we are to glean from each letter that is applicable to all churches and to all believers!

We see that in the last verses of each letter with the solemn exhortation – “He who has an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the CHURCHES!”

Jesus intends the spiritual lesson of each church to extend beyond that church to all local congregations and to everyone who has an ear.

The point is that what each church struggled with and endured will be common to the people of God throughout history.

3) And that leads us to the THIRD *application*, and that flows from the number of churches Jesus singled out – 7, speaking of the complete church – the church through the ages.

Each of the 7 letters does an incredible job of capturing for us the main spirit of the time.

The first church was *Ephesus*- the *Busy* but *Passionless* Church.

This is an apt description of the church of the end of the 1st to mid 2nd Century.

It's the Church of the Apostles which lost a bit of it's fervor and passion for Christ when the last of the Apostles died and the leadership passed to the next generation.

They faithfully followed the *example* of the Apostles, but forsook the main motivation of the Apostles – the love of Christ!

The second church was *Smyrna*- the Persecuted Church

This is a good description of the church of the mid 2nd to 4th centuries when it was the *official policy* of Rome to persecute Christians and the opposition of the Jewish leadership became organized and concerted.

Jesus warns of 10 days of tribulation that will come upon them.

From the mid 2nd through mid 4th Century, there were 10 marked campaigns of terror and persecution that were pursued by the Roman emperors.

The third church was *Pergamos*- the Compromising Church

In 316 AD, the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity.

He passed the Edict of Toleration, officially reversing the Roman tradition of opposing the Christian faith.

The Church quickly began to buddy up to the world by getting cozy with the throne.

Savvy politicians could see the direction things were going and many made professions of faith in Christ so they could ingratiate themselves to the Emperor.

Jesus says to the church at Pergamos that they live where Satan's throne is, meaning that the devil was the real power behind the seat of civil government.

What happened is that the devil realized persecution was only causing the church to grow and spread even farther as people tried to move away from the heat and violence.

They would pack up and move to new regions, carrying the gospel with them.

And at the same time, martyrdom was only serving to prove the truth and power of the gospel to change lives!

As the early church father Tertullian said, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

So the devil changed tactics and moved from an attack from without to one from within – he went to church.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

With Constantine's acceptance of Christianity and the Edict of Toleration, the church emerged from the catacombs of Rome into the light of imperial favor.

And it wasn't long until the priests and politicians of the old order realized there was a new kid on the block.

They became his best friend and many feigned conversion.

This fueled a huge push toward *compromise* with the world.

The fourth church was *Thyatira* – the Comprised Church

Pergamos marks the beginning of compromise with the world but Thyatira depicts a church that

has been taken over by compromise and worldliness.
This period of church history began in the mid-6th Century, when the church actually *took over as the civil authority* and became hopelessly corrupt – merging many of the pagan practices of the old Roman religions with Christianity, and brutally oppressing *any* group that tried to break away and return to Biblical Christianity.
Jesus speaks to a woman named Jezebel, whose heretical teaching has overturned Biblical morality and replaced it with gross idolatry.
Thyatira represents the corrupt church of the Middle Ages and the popes who used their office for political and religious control of the people.

The fifth church was *Sardis*, the Dead Church.

This is the *Reformation Church* from the 16th to the mid 18th Century.
Jesus's complaint about this church was that it had a reputation for being alive but it was really dead.
Jesus said that it's works weren't complete!
What a perfect picture of the Reformation church!
It made a break from the corrupt Church of Rome and did so on the basis of wanting to get back to the Bible as the sole authority of faith and practice.
This was Martin Luther's whole premise.
But the problem is, after a great start and wonderful promise, the reforms stalled and didn't carry through.
Many of the old practices of the corrupt church continued on in the distinction between the clergy and the laity.
The Church continued to dominate the government and wield civil power.
In many places the Pope was just replaced by some Protestant Reformer or denomination.

The sixth church is *Philadelphia*, the Faithful Missionary Church.

This well describes the Evangelical Church from the mid 18th Century up through today.
As liberalism began to take over the seminaries and pulpits of the Protestant churches, there arose a backlash from the laity that would not forsake the simple meaning of the Bible.
As the Church of Sardis was dying and the last of it's life was expiring, those who loved the Lord and held to His truth stood up and said "No" to the death dealing influences of liberalism.
Their passion for Christ burned bright, and they recaptured God's heart for the lost.
Thousands of missionaries went out to the farthest corners of the earth.

The seventh and last church is *Laodicea*, the Lukewarm Church.

What Jesus has to say to this church sounds eerily like a lot of what we see in our own time, as we'll see in our study tonight.

Another way to track these churches is by looking at what their name means.

Ephesus means "Darling," and speaks romantic love – the very thing that church had forsaken.
Smyrna comes from the word "myrrh" an embalming spice that gains it's effect by being crushed - speaking of the crushing persecution they would know.

Pergamos is a compound word from "per" as in perversion, and "gamos," the root word for *marriage*; as in *monogamy* or *polygamy*.

Pergamos was the church that was making an unholy and perverted marriage with the world.
Thyatira means "continual sacrifice" and speaks of the Mass which is the heart and soul of the Roman Catholic service.

Sardis means "remnant" and points to the fact that throughout the Pergamean and Thyatiran ages, there were always those faithful few who refused to compromise and remained faithful to the Lord.

Sardis represents the period in which they finally emerged to attempt biblical reform.

They got a good start, but were once again suppressed by those who took political control of

the Church.

Philadelphia means “brotherly love” and speaks of that age of church history when the remnant of the faithful were finally able to throw off the corruption of previous ages and get back to the main thing – loving God and loving one another.

Laodicea means “rule by the people” and speaks of that age, that final period of church history, when the church is no longer governed *by* God or seen as being *for* Him.

It becomes little more than a social institution that exists to scratch the religious itch.

What’s *extra* interesting is that starting with Thyatira, the 4th church and continuing through to the last church, Jesus speaks of how these last 4 churches will exist in some form to the end.

To Thyatira, in 2:22 He says of the false teacher Jezebel -

Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds.

To the next church, the dead church, *Sardis* - Jesus warns them in 3:3 that He will come upon them like a thief in an hour they don’t expect.

It’s interesting that in many of the main-line Protestant denominations they hold the *same view* regarding eschatology that Rome does – they are *amillennial*.

They don’t believe that Jesus is coming back visibly to earth to reign for a thousand years but that things will just continue on and on to the end – whatever and whenever that may be.

Consequently today, most of the main-line protestant denominations scoff at the idea of the Rapture and the Second coming!

The next church was Philadelphia which, because it was faithful, Jesus promised to preserve *out of* the hour of tribulation that’s coming to test the whole earth.

And the last church, Laodicea, is a church that lacks the presence of Christ altogether – He’s on the outside, inviting individuals to open up to Him.

This speaks of the Last Days apostate church that bears His name but not Him!

CHAPTER 3

14“And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God:

Laodicea was located about 40 miles SE of Philadelphia (Show Map of the churches)

It was one of 3 cities grouped together in the Lycus River Valley.

Colossae and Hieropolis were the other two, but Laodicea was the most important and influential.

It was very prosperous, being the richest city of region. (Picture of theater)

Laodicea was well-known for its rich black wool garments, for its prosperous and successful banking, and for a special eye ointment that was known to bring relief to all kinds of eye ailments.

It had a large Jewish population and was a center for Caesar-worship and the worship of the healing god Asklepios.

There was a famous medical school connected with the temple of Asklepios.

Historian William Barclay tells us that an earthquake devastated the region in 60 A.D.

But the Laodiceans refused Roman help in rebuilding the city; they wanted to rebuild out of their own resources. (According to Tacitus)

The Laodiceans were proud of themselves and this pride had infected the Church.

One of the main problems in Laodicea was the poor quality of its water supply.

There were not perennial springs inside the city walls, or even nearby for that matter.

Because of this the city was vulnerable to attack through siege.

If an enemy army surrounded the city, they had insufficient water supplies in the city, and the supplies coming into the city could be easily cut off.

For this reason, the leaders of Laodicea were always accommodating to any potential enemy, and always wanted to negotiate and compromise instead of fight. [1]

Their main water supply came on a six-mile aqueduct from the hot springs of Hierapolis.

Because the water came from hot springs, it arrived unappetizingly lukewarm and with a faint sulfur taste.

This will all figure into Jesus's message to the Church at Laodicea.

Jesus describes Himself as **the Amen**.

"Amen" is a word of *agreement* and *assent* – it's an emphatic "Yes!"

Jesus never has to modify or alter what He says; He never changes His mind.

When He has spoken, there is nothing left to say, except, "Yes!"

2 Cor. 1:20 says,

For all the promises of God in Him are "Yes," and in Him "Amen."

He is **the Faithful and True Witness**, meaning the revelation of God He brings is true and trustworthy.

He is **the Beginning of the creation of God**.

Several of the cults who deny the deity of Jesus use this verse to say that Jesus had a beginning.

But this is another classic example of how their ignorance of the original language shows through, and how one of their main texts to deny the deity of Christ actually proves it!

You see, the word, "beginning" is the Greek word *archee* and means "origin" and "ruler."

Jesus is not the *first* of the creation, as the cults place Him, He is the *origin* of the creation and the ultimate ruler *over* it.

Jesus is claiming nothing less than to be the Creator!

When Jesus describes Himself by these terms to the Laodiceans, He is affirming both His Lordship and faithfulness.

The Laodiceans needed to hear this because they had become arrogant and unfaithful.

They had allowed their Christianity to degenerate into nothing more than a dead religion that bore the label "Christian" but had no Christ!

There was a rather silly movie out some years ago called *The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen*.

The Baron was a mythical figure and a play was being staged in which an actor played him.

Much to the surprise and consternation of the theater company and audience, the real Baron Munchhausen happened to stop by and witnessed the terrible travesty they were making of his life story.

This is a vague picture of what's going on in Laodicea.

The Church at Laodicea is carrying on with a religion that in their eyes is little more than a moral legend about a mythic figure named Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus comes and tells them they're making a travesty of His life and message.

One more important thing to notice – Look at how Jesus addresses this letter.

It's to the **church of the Laodiceans**.

For the other churches, it was the church *of Ephesus* or the church *in Smyrna* or *in Pergamos*.

But here, it's the church *of the Laodiceans*.

The name *Laodicea* means "rule of the people."

As we'll see, this was a church run by majority rule instead of God.

It may be a *democratic* Church but it's not a Biblically led church.

15"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. **16**So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.

It's at this point, when Jesus says, "I know your works," in all the other letters except Sardis, He gives a *commendation*.

But there is *nothing* commendable at Laodicea!

All He has for them is rebuke.
And He uses language with which they were intimately familiar.
Their water supply was drawn from hot springs 6 miles away.
It traveled via aqueduct and arrived in Laodicea lukewarm and sulfury smelling.
Visitors to the city found the water repulsive, but the Laodiceans had grown accustomed to it.
Jesus says that in terms of the quality of their faith, they are just like the city's water.
They may be sued to it, but He finds it repulsive.
So repulsive in fact it makes Him nauseous!
Jesus wants them either hot or cold but lukewarm will not do.
The word He uses for "cold" means *freezing*.
The word "hot" means *boiling*.
Of course, the preference would be to be hot – to be zealous!
But if one isn't hot, then it's better to be cold because then you know you only have one direction to go and that's toward being hot!
The one who's lukewarm is neither cold nor hot but thinks he/she is hot enough, because they are *not* cold!
In other words, I must be okay, because I am not out doing bad stuff.
I go to church, I know the words to the songs, and I have a Bible with my name inscribed on the front cover.
I'm not a Mormon, a JW, a Hindu, a Muslim, or a Buddhist so I guess I'm a Christian.
Such lukewarm religion *by default*, such passionless *mediocrity* makes the Lord sick.

Jesus would rather we were stone cold than lukewarm because then we would be in a better spiritual place – *knowing* we aren't saved, and knowing there's only one direction we can move.
But the lukewarm are self-satisfied and see no need for change.
They are those who have one foot planted securely in both the world and in religion, not genuine faith in God, but in religion.
And all the worse if that religion goes by a label that carries the name of *Christian*.
Jesus goes on to show how the Laodiceans are totally out of touch with reality -

17 Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—

The key to understanding the Laodiceans is the phrase in v. 17 – "I have need of nothing."
They were *self-sufficient*; they had no need even of Jesus.
Their version Christianity had no Christ as we see in v. 20 where Jesus is on the *outside* of their church.

Every true believer lives by the motto, "Christ is my life and all."
I need Christ every moment!
My sufficiency is not in myself but in Jesus.
"For me to live is Christ & to die is gain." [Philippians 1:21]
But this is not at all the perspective of the Laodiceans.
They had it all! Their banks had accumulated great wealth.
Their clothing & textile industry had provided sumptuous garments.
Because of the temple and medical school of Asklepios their health was the best.
They had it all, or so they thought.
Jesus says their *real condition* is 180 degrees different from what they thought.
They thought they were rich – but they are poor.
They thought they had acquired wealth through their own goodness and effort – but Jesus says they are wretched, miserable, and naked.
They thought they were above need - but they had the greatest need of all; the ability to see!
In the things that *really* matter they had *nothing*.
Jesus said to them, "You are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked."
This wasn't just His opinion, it was the truth.

What Jesus sees in them is more important than how they see themselves.

The persecuted church in Smyrna thought they were poor, but Jesus said they were rich. [2]
The church of the Laodiceans believed they are rich when they are really poor.
They were so out of touch with Him and the realm of the Spirit they were totally insensitive to their true state.

This insensitivity proved they were in fact – dead!

But even though they were dead, Jesus issued an invitation to them –

18] counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see.

Jesus invites all people to come to Him, even those who've maintained a façade of religion.

I've always been impressed in listening to Billy Graham give the altar call at his crusades; he will often say something like,

“You may be an elder or deacon in your church and yet you realize tonight you've not been born again. Don't let your title or office in the church hinder you from settling this issue with God tonight. You come forward and receive God's gift of eternal life.”

Jesus invites the Laodiceans to come to Him and acquire what the markets, banks, and medical school of Laodicea cannot give.

They promise *material* health & wealth, but Jesus offers eternal riches & wholeness!

Gold that's refined in the fire speaks of the wealth of virtue and character that only the Holy Spirit can bring about, not through a carefree and trouble-free existence, but one that's put to the test and reduced to dependence on God alone.

In place of the sumptuous black wool garments the Laodiceans wore, Jesus wanted to clothe them in pure white garments – made of *linen*, as we read later in chapter 19.

Wool is a hot fabric that encourages perspiration while linen is a light fabric to which perspiration will not adhere.

The garments of the priest were made of linen and spoke of the fact that human effort and work are not the means of our acceptance by God.

It is His righteousness and favor granted as a gift.

For their spiritual blindness, they need to come to Him for healing and the recovery of sight.

In Isaiah 55 God says,

- 1 “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price.**
- 2 Why do you spend money for *what is* not bread, And your wages for *what does not satisfy*? Listen carefully to Me, and eat *what is* good, And let your soul delight itself in abundance.**
- 3 Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, and your soul shall live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you.**

As we compare what the Laodiceans were saying to Jesus's diagnosis and prescription, we realize that while they considered themselves a Christian church, their whole understanding of what it means to be Christian was skewed and 180 degrees out of phase with reality.

They had reduced the Faith to nothing more than a religious creed.

It wasn't about a relationship with God – it was membership in a religious organization.

And they had redefined the *object* of faith to be worldly success, measurable in carnal terms.

They took their bank balance, wardrobe, and physical health as the chief indicators of whether or not they were godly.

Look at what they said –

17 Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'

The Laodiceans were the original *positive confessors* and adherents to the health and wealth message. The spiritual malaise that marked Laodicea lies on our land like an epidemic.

And the self-confident words of the Laodiceans are being repeated like a mantra in many churches given over to the Faith Message today.

19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

Jesus loved the erring Laodiceans!

Even though they were spiritually lukewarm and nauseatingly bland in their attitude toward God, He still cared for them.

He reminds them that it's a mark and measure of His love when they experience trial, for it's through trial that they're weaned off their self-reliance onto Him.

The Laodiceans had come to believe that a trouble-free life was a sign of their godliness.

Health, wealth, and smooth-sailing were for them the only signs of God's approving favor – *rewards* from the Almighty for being religious.

But Jesus has a higher goal than their sensual comfort – He's fitting them for heaven and preparing them to rule and reign with Him.

And that school involves some *hard* classes.

In Hebrews 12 we read –

5 . . . "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; ⁶For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives." ⁷If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?

God's blessings come in *many* forms.

Sometimes they're goodies, and other times they're trials.

He uses *whatever means* are necessary to reveal Himself as a God of love and holiness and to conform us to the image of Christ.

God loves us just as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us that way.

Jesus is not interested in making sure we're comfortable - His aim is to make us holy.

The problem is when we think blessing can *only* be *pleasurable* stuff.

That's what the Laodiceans had done – they equated their prosperity with God's favor and relegated trial to the sign of a lack of faith.

So Jesus corrects them – He rebukes and chastens the ones He loves.

Their view on the blessing of God had led to a bland life of being spiritually lukewarm – Jesus calls them to repent and get *hot*, which is what the word "zealous" means.

It's the same word as "hot" in vs. 15 & 16.

There's a narrow but crucial distinction between *zeal* and *fanaticism*.

The fanatic has an *unreasoned excitement* and sense of loyalty *not deserved* by what or whoever they're devoted to.

The zealot *understands* why he or she is excited: they have a convincing reason for their loyalty!

You cannot fully reflect on the greatness of Christ and His gift of eternal life without getting excited.

If you can come to the cross and consider what happened there, and go away unmoved, unmotivated, and lacking in devotion, then something is desperately wrong.

This is why the Lord calls us to a regular attendance at His table, celebrating Communion often.

It puts everything in the proper perspective and stokes the fire of our passion for the Lord.

Then He makes this disturbing remark -

20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.

To the first church, Ephesus, Jesus had given the warning that if they didn't repent and recapture their first love, He would remove their lampstand, meaning they would cease to be a church in his eyes.

As we come now to the last church – we see that Jesus is not IN the church at Laodicea.

He's outside, knocking on the door.

And the invitation is not *to the church*, but to *individuals* in the Church who will welcome Him in.

In other words, Laodicea represents the church that bears His name as a mere label but not His actual presence.

As David Guzik remarks, if Philadelphia represents the *Church of the Open Door*, then Laodicea is the *Church of the Shut-out Jesus*.

Jesus says, "Look, take careful note-I'm not in your church. I'm outside."

"But I haven't totally given up on you. I haven't walked away once and for all."

"I'm giving you one last chance. If any of you *individual* Laodiceans wake up and respond to the voice of the Spirit, repenting of your dead religion and returning to the heart of what it means to be a Christian – to be in *fellowship* with Me, then I will indeed come in and you will enjoy the reality and blessing of My salvation."

The word "dine" refers to the main meal of the day – we call it *supper*.

It was a leisurely affair shared between those who wanted to be in close fellowship.

21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

In that day, the oriental throne was like a small couch.

If a ruler wanted to show special favor to someone, he would extend his scepter toward them and invite them to come and sit with him on his throne.

That person would then ask a favor, and the ruler would grant it with the same authority as if it had been his decree.

Jesus is saying that He will extend His acceptance to us by exalting us to the very highest position of favor and privilege.

We will rule with Him. ^[3]

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

What the Lord has to say to Laodicea, is applicable to all.

CONCLUSION

As I mentioned earlier, starting with Thyatira and then for each of the final 4 churches, Jesus makes mention of them in light of the last days.

Thyatira represents the Roman Catholic Church.

Sardis represents the Dead Liberal Protestant church.

Philadelphia represents the Evangelical church that remains faithful to the Bible as the Word of God.

And Laodicea represents the spiritually empty apostate church of the last days.

All four of these church cultures are alive and well today - indeed, this seems to be the age of the Church of Laodicea.

Next week, we'll get in to chapter 4, which begins with a dramatic change in both the text & tone of the book – signaling an end of the church age and the beginning of John's visions of the Last Days.

[1] Guzik, David

[2] Rev. 2:9

[3] Matt. 19:28 25:31 Isa. 9:7 Luke 1:32-33 22:29-30