

THE POOR-RICH CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

The city of Laodicea was located about 100 miles directly east of Ephesus, the first city to which these seven letters were addressed. Laodicea was part of a tri-city area, closely associated with the cities of Colossae (to which the letter to the Colossians was written), and Hierapolis. Laodicea was noted throughout the Roman province of Asia for its wealth, its commercial life, and its medical practice. As the banking center of Asia, it was the most prosperous of the seven cities. Many large, beautiful homes were built in this city, the ruins of which are still visible, and probably some of them were owned by Christians. Laodicea also had a flourishing clothing industry. A particular breed of black sheep were raised around this area, and the glossy, black wool was woven into special clothes that were sold here. The city was also noted for its medical practice, especially for its eye and ear salve. The medical cult of Aesculapius was located here. Incidentally, doctors in the military services of the United States still wear the symbol of a staff with entwined serpents around it, the symbol of Aesculapius. Laodicea was thus a kind of Bank of America, Macy's Department Store and Mayo Clinic all rolled into one. That will explain some of the references we find in this letter to the church there.

As in all the letters, our Lord introduces himself in a very significant way. His opening description form the key to what the church needs.

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation." {Rev 3:14 NIV}

Apparently the Lord wanted this church to see him in this capacity. He was first of all the "Amen." We are all familiar with this word. We utter it when we close a prayer or when we want to express our agreement with a meaningful statement. But it is also a word that Jesus used frequently. In the more modern versions of the gospels, he begins many statements with the words, "Truly, truly, I say unto you." The King James Version renders it, "Verily, verily." Actually, in Greek, that is "Amen, Amen." It indicates that Jesus is saying something extremely important. It always marks significant truth. So when you come to this word in the Gospels, pay careful attention because Jesus himself is underscoring that what he is saying is not only true, but it is important truth.

We use "Amen" as a last word, and it has that meaning too, when God speaks. The book of Hebrews begins, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son," {Heb 1:1-2a NIV}. The word of Jesus is the last word, the final word of God to man. Anyone who goes beyond the words of Jesus is not giving us new truth; he is departing from the final word that God has spoken.

Also, our Lord calls himself "the faithful and true witness." He has emphasized his truthfulness before in these letters, but here he adds the word "faithful," i.e., he not only tells the truth, but he tells all the truth. He does not hide anything. He speaks plainly and clearly and reveals the whole truth. He wants this church to understand that.

The third phrase is not, as the NIV version puts it, "the ruler of God's creation." It is really the word "the beginning of God's creation." It is the same word that the Gospel of John opens with: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," {John 1:1 NIV}. Two verses later John says, "All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made," {John 1:3 KJV}. Jesus is the origin, the beginning of God's creation. But not merely of the old creation, i.e. the physical universe in which we live, including the great galaxies of space, the planetary system of our sun, and the earth itself. All came from the hands of Jesus as the source of God's creation. But Jesus is also the source of the new creation that God is building. Paul tells us in Second Corinthians 5, "if anyone is in Christ he [or she] is

a new creation," {2 Cor 5:17a NIV}. We are part of a new world that the Lord is bringing into being. It has already begun -- that is the point: "old things have passed away; behold all things have become new," {2 Cor 5:17b KJV}.

This church in Laodicea particularly needs to know that truth. At the end of his letter to the Colossians, Paul says, "See that [this letter] is read also in the church of the Laodiceans," {Col 4:16b NIV}. So the Laodiceans were to be familiar with the letter to Colossae, and it is in that letter that the apostle emphasizes Jesus' link with creation. He is the "firstborn of creation" {cf, Col 1:15}, and the "firstborn from the dead" {Col 1:18b KJV}, [i.e., in resurrection] which is the new creation. This church at Laodicea needs to be told important truth, the whole truth, and especially truth about how to relate to God's new creation.

What does the Lord see in this church at Laodicea? In every letter Jesus says, "I know your works." He is aware of what goes on in every church. He is watching us as well.

"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." {Rev 3:15-16 NIV}

There were two problems in this church:

1. First, there was something wrong with their commitment. They were neither cold nor hot. They were suffering from what someone has well called "the leukemia of non-commitment."
2. And, also, there was something wrong with their self-image, as we will see in Verse 17. They thought they were rich, but they were really poor.

The church at Sardis was a cold church, a dead church. It was as cold as death. The church at Philadelphia was hot, alive, and vital. But here in Laodicea was a church that was neither hot nor cold. It is merely lukewarm. Archaeologists have discovered an interesting fact about this city. It had no local water supply, but obtained their water through an aqueduct from the hot springs at Hierapolis, some six miles away.

If you were staying in a motel in Laodicea and turned on the tap to get a cold drink, and tasted the water, you would probably spit it out again because it was tepid, lukewarm. Traveling that distance, the hot water had partly cooled down, and it would be nauseating, repulsive. The word our Lord actually uses here is not "spit out," but "vomit." He will vomit out the church because it was nauseating to him.

What created this condition? There is only one answer. It is compromise! When you want to make something lukewarm you mix together hot and cold. We do this continually with regard to air temperature.

This morning when I arrived here it was very cold in the church, so cold the choir actually had overcoats on. It has warmed up since then, and you can be grateful for that. We humans do not like extremes of temperature. We do not like it to be cold, and we do not like it when it is hot. So what do we do? For our comfort we mix the two together. We come out with what is comfortably warm.

That is what was happening in the church at Laodicea. They were compromising spiritually for comfort's sake. It is much more comfortable to attend a church where nobody takes doctrinal issues very seriously, where, for comfort's sake, you avoid discussions over issues. This church was compromising its teaching for the sake of peace. They had enough truth to salve the conscience without becoming fanatics; but enough coolness to calm their wills without freezing people out. It was a comfortable church. You could have attended this church for years and it would have probably been very pleasurable, but nothing much would be happening. You would not be challenged, or rebuked, or corrected, or exhorted, but only encouraged and respected because it was a comfortable church, but also a compromising church.

What does Jesus think of a church like that? Yuck! Its nauseating! Repulsive! The people may like it, but Jesus does not. It may make them comfortable, but it makes him sick!

Once again I have to say there are thousands of churches like this around the world today, here in our country as well as elsewhere. In my judgment the most destructive and dangerous attitude a church can have -- and I run into it everywhere -- is that the church belongs to the people, they own it, and it exists for their benefit. That is what turns a church into what some have called a Religious Country Club, operating for the benefit of the members.

Some years ago a young pastor asked me: "What would you do if you were in my place? Last week," he said, "the chairman of the board of our church called me in, and said to me,

'You've been pastor here for a year and you're a fine young man. We like you. You're a good Bible teacher. But there are a couple of things we want you to understand before we renew your contract.

First, we want you to know this: This is our church. It is not yours. We were here before you came and we will be here after you leave. We don't want you making a lot of changes in this church.

Second, we want you to understand that we hired you, and we can fire you. If you don't like the way we do things, then you will have to go, not us."

He then said, "I have to meet with them again next week, what do you think I should tell them?"

I said, "Well, I would tell them, 'The next time we meet please bring your Bibles because we're going to have a Bible study.' And when you meet together I would say to them, 'I understand that some of you feel that this is your church. Now I want you to show me that in the Scriptures, because as I read Scripture, I find that Jesus says, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it," {Matt 16:18 KJV}. And when Paul speaks to the elders at Ephesus he says, "Tend the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof," {cf, Acts 20:28}. Nowhere in Scripture does it say that the church belongs to the people. It is Christ's church, and he has the right to determine what it shall be like and what goes on within it.'"

About two weeks later I got a letter from this young man. He said, "I did just what you said. I went back to the board and told them what you told me -- and they fired me!" But a couple of weeks later I got another letter from him, and it said, "Another church has called me, and we settled all these matters before I started. I think this one is going to go." I have followed it through the years and I can tell you a flourishing church has resulted from that young man's ministry.

Each church is the Lord's church -- that is what Laodicea forgot.

But Laodicea was not only comfortable but, even worse, it was complacent. The Lord says to it in Verse 17:

"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." {Rev 3:17 NIV}

What a sad condition! There is a big difference between "you say," and "you are." Our Lord points this difference out. This is the "Faithful and True witness" speaking, the one who tells the whole truth, even though it hurts. This church at Laodicea was, to use a popular expression, "fat, dumb and happy." It was smug. It was self-sufficient. It was complacent. They had plenty of money. Perhaps they had beautiful buildings, gifted preachers, a great choir, a great organ, and the respect of the community. They thought they were doing well. But when Jesus looks at it, he says, "You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."

Why such a difference in these two views? It is because they were being measured by two different standards.

I might say to you, "What is the temperature today?" and you would look at a thermometer and say, "It is 32 above zero." But I might check another thermometer and say, "No, you are wrong. It is zero." The truth is, we would both be right because one thermometer was Fahrenheit and the other was Centigrade. Zero in Centigrade is 32 above on Fahrenheit. If you use two different standards of measurement, you will never be able to agree on what the true temperature is.

That is what was happening here. They were being measured by two different standards. Laodicea was using the standards of the world. It was pleasant, comfortable, approved by the community around, and they thought they were doing well. But Jesus is using the standard of what he intended his church to be like.

- It is definitely not to be a Country Club, run for the benefit of the members.
- It is not a Performing Arts Center either, where one is entertained with wonderful music.
- It is not to be a Political Action Group, taking sides on the issues of the day, nor is it to be a protest movement.

Elements of all these may, at times, be legitimately expressed in the church, but none is to be its *raison d'etre*, the purpose for which it exists.

Jesus tells us plainly what his church is to be like. It is to be salt -- and not just plain salt, but salty salt! He said, "Salt that loses its saltiness is good for nothing," {Matt 5:13, Mark 9:50, Luke 14:34}. It will only be cast out and trodden under the feet of men. But a church that is salt should be salty. He means that, like salt in food, it should be spread throughout the whole area, flavoring whatever it touches. The church is to function not only when it meets on Sunday, but out where you people are during the week -- in business offices, in the marketplace, in shops, in your home, wherever you are. That is where the church does its work. That is where it is to tell the good news and to be salt, flavoring life with a different flavor, a different attitude toward circumstances, which does not go along with the willful, wicked, and wanton ways of the world but which chooses to walk in truth, righteousness, love and honesty. That is how the church becomes salt, filled with good works.

And it is also to be light. "You are like a city set on a hill," said Jesus. "You are the light of the world," {Matt 5:14 NIV}. Light is a symbol of truth. The church is to be a source of truth and of vision. It is the church that is charged with the task of making people understand the program of God throughout history, and of interpreting the events of the day so that men see what God is doing, not what man intends to do. That is the work of the church: To declare the truth about humanity's lost condition and the good news that a Savior has been born who will save us from our sin. Judged by that standard, Laodicea had nothing. They were as though stripped naked, poor, pitiful, wretched, and blind.

In each of these letters we have been looking at the churches as prophetic of a certain period in the history of the church. There is nothing in the text itself, I grant you, that tells us that, other than the general statement made in the first chapter that this whole book is a prophecy -- and that description applies to Chapters 2 and 3, as well as to the rest of the book. But, when you look back across these twenty centuries of church history, you can see how accurate this prophecy has been. Each of the seven churches represents a time where the prevailing general atmosphere was consistent with the conditions described in that church. Now we come to the seventh age of the church. It is clear, as both history and prophecy would confirm, that Laodicea is the church of the 20th century, the last age of the church. It is characterized by the phenomenon of the people dictating what will be taught. It is significant, is it not, that the name Laodicea means "The judgment of the people," or, to put it loosely, "People's rights." That is the cry of our times, is it not? The rights of the people -- exactly the opposite of the Nicolaitans who were a dominating clergy class that told the people what to believe. But Laodicea is where the people tell the ministers what to preach. We are seeing this happen today. The Apostle Paul predicted it in his second letter to Timothy when he said, "In the last times people will gather unto themselves teachers having itching ears, who will turn many from the truth and turn them unto myths and fables," {cf, 2 Tim 4:3-4}. Unfortunately, and sadly, that is what is happening today.

There was once a time when the church taught that the self life, the natural life with which we were born, was something that needed to be crucified. It needed to be denied. It required careful control and to be kept under rigid restrictions. Jesus said it himself, "He that comes after me must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me," {Matt 16:34, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23}. But we are living in a day when churches are openly advancing self, asserting self, saying we should discover its possibilities, and act and live in the light of those possibilities. Once the inerrancy of Scripture formed the bedrock of all evangelical churches. You could count on the fact that the Bible was fully accepted as the unerring Word of God. But now churches, seminaries, and

colleges that call themselves *evangelical*, are rethinking the nature of the Scriptures, denying the inerrancy of the Word, and claiming that we cannot trust it; it must be judged by men before it can be accepted.

I heard last week of a man who has made a careful study of three of the major Christian colleges of this country. I will not name them, but they are well known. This man studied their beginnings and then their present outlook and he carefully documents the drift away from the truths that the founders of the schools wanted to perpetuate.

This is the age of compromise, of drift within the church. Once there was a great urge within the church to evangelize the lost, simply because they were lost. The Scriptures tell us that all men are lost, that we are a lost race, drifting down the river of time. We reflect that lostness in the corruption and evil that is widespread in our day -- the pollution of our planet, the terrible rise of crime, the frightening toll that drugs and other things take of our youth, the failure of morals, etc. All this is testimony to the fact that we are not a pure people. We are not born good. We are born lost. But in many churches we are being told that God is too loving to condemn anybody; that good people like Ghandi and Schweitzer, who were not evangelical Christians at all, must at least have a second chance after death. Once it was unheard of in churches that the murder of unborn babies would be approved by evangelical believers, or that homosexuality would ever be acceptable. Yet, as we well know, abortion is increasingly accepted, even by evangelical Christians in many places. And on national television this week it was announced that the Episcopal Church has ordained its first openly practicing homosexual as a priest within that church. This is truly the age of Laodicea.

Our Lord's appeal to this church falls into three simple divisions. First of all, verse 18:

"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." {Rev 3:18 NIV}

The key to that verse is the three little words "buy from me." Jesus has all the church really needs to function. It is nice to have buildings, great choirs and beautiful music. These are not wrong, I do not mean in any way to suggest that they are, but they are not what the church needs. What it needs is what our Lord describes here, "Gold, and white clothing, and eye salve." We will see in a moment what those symbols stand for, but he alone possesses them. That is why it really does not make any difference whether we are persecuted, hounded by the government, put to death, or patronized and accepted. What the church needs is to be obtained only from Jesus, and our Lord tells us what it is.

First, "gold refined in the fire." Peter interprets that for us. He tells us that our faith is like gold refined in the fire: "More precious even than gold that perishes, though it be tried by fire," {cf, 1 Pet 1:7}. Faith in God. Faith in his Word. Faith comes from Jesus. As we look to him our faith is awakened and stirred. We then see how true the Scriptures are, how they explain life and fit with all that we experience daily. That awakens a sense of confidence and faith, and that is what this church needed first. It lacked faith in God, but was resting on its own abilities or the world's resources.

Then, second, they needed white clothes: "white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness." Everyone is morally naked before God. Every one of us knows something about ourselves that we would not want anyone else to know. But God knows! He sees us in our nakedness. What does he offer for it? The righteousness of Christ! All through these letters we have seen that white clothes stand for redemption, for righteousness imparted by Christ. We are no longer to be clothed with our own self-righteousness, which Isaiah says is nothing but filthy rags in the sight of God, but we are to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ himself, a perfect righteousness which God accepts.

Jesus, thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head."

White clothes stand for a changed character; they mark someone who has taken his robes and washed them in

the blood of the Lamb, as we will read in Chapter 7.

Then the third thing that is needed is eye salve. Laodicea was noted for their eye ointment. But Jesus says they need spiritual eye salve that will enable them to see. Everywhere in Scripture we have mention of an anointing of the Spirit which opens eyes to understand the truth of God. John speaks of this in his first letter. He says, "The anointing that you received from him remains in you and you do not need anyone to teach you, but his anointing is real, not counterfeit, and teaches you all truth," {cf, 1 Jn 2:27 NIV}. That does not do away with the need for human teachers. It means that unless the Spirit in you is opening your eyes to the meaning of truth taught it will fall upon deaf ears. But if we have the Spirit of Christ within, our eyes are opened to understand the Word of God and we see the Bible in a new, fresh and wonderful way.

Are you having trouble with your Bible reading? Is it hard going? Is it difficult to understand? Then ask yourself, "Do I have the Spirit of truth? Have I received him or do I need this counsel of Jesus to "come to me and I will give you that anointing which opens your eyes to see"?"

The second division of our Lord's appeal is given in Verses 19-20, where we learn how to get this gold and white clothes and eye salve. This is, I believe, one of the most beautiful sections of Scripture, a most gracious offer our Lord makes to individuals within the church of Laodicea to change. Here is what he says:

"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me." {Rev 3:19-20 NIV}

What a kind and loving word! Our Lord is simply telling this church, despite its terrible weakness and failure, "I love you, and it is because I love you that I rebuke you and discipline you." Does that remind you of the way your father treated you? Did he ever take you aside and paddle you for something and say as he did it, "I am only doing this because I love you"? You go away rubbing your behind and saying, "I wish you didn't love me so much!" But Jesus speaks with bluntness because he loves this church, and he offers them a wonderful way out.

Verse 20 is one of the finest explanations in the whole Bible of how to become a Christian. I have used it hundreds of times and seen it work. It has three simple divisions:

1. First, there comes a sense that Christ is outside your life and knocking at the door of your heart, wanting to come in. That occurs when you feel your life is not what you want it to be. You feel empty and disturbed about yourself. You hear the good news in song and word about Jesus, the kind of Lord he is, what he can do, and something within you responds. You sense the knocking of Christ and you want him to come in. You long for it. You begin to be awakened to your need, and you sense him offering to enter your life. That is step number one.
2. Then the second step is very important. You must open the door. He will not open it. He is not going to force himself upon you. He never forces anyone into salvation. He offers it to you. Everywhere in Scripture Jesus offers himself to men and women, and he grieves over the fact that people do not receive his offer. Remember that remarkable scene in the Gospels during Jesus' last week in Jerusalem when he comes over the top of the Mount of Olives and sees the city spread out beneath him. He wept over the rebellious city, saying, "O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You stone the prophets and kill everybody God sends to you. How often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, but you would not," {cf, Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34}. So he offers himself here, if you will open the door. You must invite him in. You must say to him, "Come in Lord Jesus. Enter my life. Be my Lord. Be my Savior. Deliver me from my sins -- and myself."
3. Then the third step is very clear. He will enter in! He says so. You do not have to feel him enter. He does not say he will give you the feeling that he is there, although certainly that will come in time, but he says, "If you open the door I will enter in and remain with you. We will eat together and be together." It is a beautiful picture of permanently dwelling with you. He will move in to live with you.

There may be some here this morning who have never opened their hearts to Christ. If you turn away from his knocking you will remain lost, and, eventually, if you never repent, you will enter eternity lost forever. But our Lord says if you will open the door (you can do it even while I am finishing this message), and say in your heart, "Lord Jesus, come into my life and deliver me, change me, save me; I receive you, Lord," he will enter. John promises in his Gospel, "As many as received him, to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, even to them who believe on his name," {John 1:12 KJV}.

The third aspect of our Lord's appeal is his word to the overcomer. It is given in Verses 21-22:

"To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." {Rev 3:21-22 NIV}

Again, as we have seen in the last three letters, the promise is to share in our Lord's reign. The true church is intended to reign with Christ. But our Lord makes a very careful distinction here. Notice how he distinguishes between his throne and his Father's throne. The Father's throne, of course, is the sovereign government of the universe. God is sovereign over all. The whole universe is under his control. Every human event comes under his jurisdiction. That is the Father's throne. When our Lord had overcome, when he, too, had endured faithfully to the end of his life, trusting God (as we are to trust God throughout the rest of our lives), he sat down on his Father's throne. When he ascended, we are told, "He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God," {cf, Heb 12:2}. Hebrews says that and Psalm 110 had predicted it. Thus he is Lord over all the universe right now, on his Father's throne.

But he too has a throne. He calls it "my throne." The overcoming Christian is invited to reign with him on it. In Scripture that throne is called the "Throne of David." When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, as recorded in the first chapter of Luke, he told her that she would have a son, that he would be called the Son of God and that the Lord God would give unto him "the throne of his father David, and he would reign over the house of Jacob forever," {Luke 1:32-33}. The house of Jacob is the nation of Israel; all twelve tribes are descended from the sons of Jacob. So this is a promise particularly relating to the time yet to come when Jesus assumes the throne of David and Israel is made the head of the nations. It is the millennial kingdom which has been mentioned several times in these letters already. The church, resurrected and glorified, is to share with him in that reign. That does not end the reign of the church with Christ. It goes on into the new heavens and the new earth. But this is a particular promise looking to the coming kingdom on earth when Jesus will reign over the earth. Our Lord had explained this to his disciples in a rather amazing passage in the 19th of Matthew. In verse 28 it says, "Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth [i.e., verily, verily, or, Amen, Amen] at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel,'" {Matt 19:28 NIV}. You could not put that any plainer, could you? "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters of father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first," {Matt 19:29-30 NIV}. That is our Lord's amplification of this promise here.

Now for the last time in these letters we hear our Lord say, "He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" -- not what the churches say about themselves, or to the world, but what the Spirit says to the churches. We are to receive truth from God and dispense it to the world. But we do not originate truth. We do not think up the things that we would like to believe and spread that abroad. We are responsible to hear what the Spirit says to the churches and then to pass that along, as we function as salt and light in the world.

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