

# LAODICEA: LOVE JESUS WITH ALL YOUR HEART

*SERIES: JESUS: LORD OF HIS CHURCH*

**by Ron Ritchie**

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Thirty-five hundred years ago, God, the Husband of Israel, spoke to his bride just before they entered the promised land after wandering in the wilderness for forty years: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4-5). He said, further, "Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today" (Deut. 8:11-18).

How quickly a bride can fall out of love with her husband! When she becomes proud and self-sufficient, her love for her husband becomes lukewarm. That is exactly what happened to Israel, what happened to the bride of Jesus Christ in the city of Laodicea, and what can happen within this very body of believers if we are not maintaining our passionate love for our Husband Jesus. But lukewarm love is sickening.

## **The church in Laodicea: Love Jesus with a full heart**

Revelation 3:14:

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.

On a Sunday in 94-95 AD while John was a prisoner of Rome on the island of Patmos, he was free in the Spirit to enjoy a visit with the Lord Jesus Christ in the courts of God. On that Sunday Jesus commissioned his beloved apostle to write what we now call the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Part of John's commission was to record our Lord's words of encouragement, correction, exhortation, and promise; and then to make sure they were delivered to his bride, the seven churches in western Turkey. Jesus chose those seven churches as a symbol of completeness. That is, his spiritual evaluation of them is what he wanted to say to every church then and to every church in every generation until his return.

So far in our study we have seen that Jesus, the Lord and Husband of his bride, warned the church in Ephesus to guard their love for him, encouraged the church in Smyrna to remain faithful to him in the midst of suffering, encouraged the church in Pergamum to remain faithful to the truth of the gospel, exhorted the church in Thyatira to deal with the Jezebel in their midst and remain holy, exhorted the church in Sardis to wake up spiritually or lose their lampstand, and delighted in the church in Philadelphia and opened doors of opportunity for them to share the gospel and serve the community. Now Jesus finally came to the last church on the 250-mile horseshoe-shaped postal route in Asia Minor, the church in Laodicea. In his evaluation of them, he called them to repent of their lukewarm relationship with their Husband.

Laodicea was a major urban center located on the south bank of the River Lycus, about forty miles southeast of

Philadelphia. The church may have been established in the late 50s A.D. by Epaphras, a fellow servant of the apostle Paul (see Colossians 4:12-13). Paul never visited Laodicea, but he had a heart for those believers. In writing to the Colossians from a Roman prison (60-61 A.D.), the apostle sent greetings to the Laodiceans and wanted his letter to be read to them (see Colossians 4:13,15-16). It appears that both churches were struggling with the false doctrine of gnosticism, which sought to reduce Christianity to a legal system and Jesus Christ to one of the lesser gods. Some of the Jewish Christians were also bringing legalism into the church with their emphasis on circumcision, meats, drinks, fast days, new moons, Sabbath days, etc. In his letter Paul addressed the theological problems in both of these churches.

Now thirty years later, Jesus directed John to write a stern love letter to his bride in Laodicea. Their spiritual battles did not consist of confronting the synagogue of Satan, the Roman government, or false teachers; rather, their spiritual battle raged within their own hearts. They were about to lose their golden lampstand that held up the Light of the world because their love for Jesus had become lukewarm.

"These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation." The English translation of Isaiah 65:16 calls God "the God of truth," but in the Hebrew it says, "The God of Amen." Amen is a word used to affirm or confirm a statement. Jesus' calling himself "the Amen" means that the word that he was about to say to the church was foundational, authoritative, faithful, and true. In effect, if Jesus said it, then amen, so be it, period!

Jesus is the faithful, true, and perfect witness to tell mankind about the things of God because he is the Son of God. In describing himself this way, Jesus was referring back to Revelation 1:5-7, where he reminded this church that the Revelation John wrote to them came from the Father through the Spirit to the Son Jesus Christ:

"Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father---to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

Look, he is coming with the clouds,  
and every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and all the peoples of the earth  
will mourn because of him.

So shall it be! Amen."

The Amen is true and faithful, for he accomplished everything the Father sent him to earth to accomplish in deed and witness. He freed us from our sins by his blood.

John recorded that Jesus is the ruler of the creation (meaning the creator of the creation; see John 1). So it was the Son of God, the Amen, the faithful and true witness, and the ruler of the creation who was about to give a word of correction to the believers in Laodicea.

It is important to remember that the lukewarm church in Laodicea existed in a particular historical setting. But it is sobering to realize that the sin of the Laodiceans has weakened the church across its two thousand year history. Further, this letter is addressed to each one of us personally, with the hope that we will be willing to allow our loving Husband Jesus Christ to look into our heart to see if we have fallen into the sin of lukewarmness. As he concluded at the end of the letter, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says [present tense] to the churches."

## **A word of correction**

Revelation 3:15-18:

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. 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. 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.

The cities of Laodicea, Hierapolis, and Colosse were all located in the valley of the River Lycus. They had a problem getting access to good water, which the Romans solved by building a six-mile aqueduct from the snowcapped mountains to the valley. The water came out of the mountains ice-cold, but by the time it reached the cities it was lukewarm. At the same time, in the valley there were abundant hot springs producing boiling water. So the Lord Jesus spoke in terms that were very familiar to these believers.

Jesus said to his bride, "I know your deeds...I have personal, intimate knowledge of your so-called 'good works.' On the outside they may look good, but I see the motivation of your hearts, and in my judgment they are lukewarm. Your witness as my lampstand in this city is lukewarm. I wish that your lives were either boiling hot like the springs in the valley, or ice-cold like the snow in the mountains. I would rather that you be fervent in your love for me or even give me the cold shoulder, but this lukewarm attitude makes me sick." They had some interest in spiritual things, but only as it fit into their busy schedules. Their sin was lack of wholehearted love for their Husband. Their hearts had lost the joy of thankfulness. They were depending on their own power rather than on the Spirit to produce religious deeds. They had lost the will to choose to give him their lives, their hopes, their dreams, their trials, their failures. They had forgotten that he was the Amen, the true and faithful witness, and the ruler of God's creation. They needed to rekindle the flame of their love for their Husband. Their lukewarm relationship with Jesus was totally unacceptable to him.

Then Jesus revealed the root cause of their lukewarm spirit: "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." The city of Laodicea was located at the crossroads of several commercial trade routes, which enabled it to become a gateway to central Asia. There was a famous medical school in that city where the doctors had developed a powder that could cure diseased ears and inflamed eyes. Laodicea was also a famous center for fine wool products. This created a community of rich merchants and doctors. They became so rich that after the earthquake of 60 A.D., they refused to ask Rome for aid, but rather rebuilt the city out of their own public funds. Many believers in the Laodicean church became overwhelmed by their commercial success, which resulted in self-sufficiency; they declared that they didn't need a thing. They had forgotten that the ruler of the earth had provided all that they had.

But then the Lord of the church walked among his people and saw that those who thought they were physically healthy were spiritually sick, because they had forgotten that peace and joy are gifts of the Spirit who lives within them. Those who thought they were emotionally happy were spiritually wretched. Those who thought they were compassionate were to be pitied. Those who thought they were materially rich were spiritually bankrupt, because they did not rely on the Lord Jesus to guide them in the use of their riches. Those who thought they had keen insight into business deals were spiritually blind, because they no longer focused on Jesus for spiritual insight and direction. And those who thought they had the financial resources to purchase the finest clothes were spiritually naked before Christ.

These are alarming words from the heart of the Lord of the church, but this loving spiritual evaluation was necessary in order to challenge a body of believers who had a lukewarm love for him, for his people, and for the surrounding community. The apostle John had written a letter to these churches earlier in which he said, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world---the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does---comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:15-17).

I had the privilege this month of talking to five spiritually mature Christian men, each of whom the world

would say has power, position, and possessions. During our conversations, I found that each one was growing more in love with Jesus. At the same time their so-called power, position, and possessions had grown strangely dim, in light of their desire to walk in the Spirit and allow Jesus to accomplish his will through them in their families, neighborhoods, and work environments.

If the root of the problem of lukewarmness is self-sufficiency, then the cure of lukewarmness can be found in an appointment with the Wonderful Counselor (see Isaiah 9:6): "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." Here we see again the Wonderful Counselor who was willing to bring his wayward bride some hope of spiritual health. Her attitude of self-sufficiency had made her passionate love for her Husband lukewarm. Lukewarmness is a spiritual disorder that confuses the mind, dulls the spirit, blurs the eye, and leaves the patient in a state of quiet despair. But our Lord was not willing to leave his bride in this horrible state; rather, he was willing to offer her spiritual counsel, eternal truth so she could become spiritually rich, righteous, and clear-eyed again. And what advice was the Amen, the true and faithful witness, the ruler of the world, and the Wonderful Counselor willing to give to his lukewarm bride?

(1) "I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich...." They said they had no needs, but Jesus disagreed with them. They had deep spiritual needs that only he could satisfy. They needed to shop in his store for gold. Gold is the Biblical symbol for purity which corresponds to the glory of God himself. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). In order for gold to become valuable, the rocks that contain it have to be placed into a crucible, which is in turn placed into a hot fire. The fire brings the impurities to the top of the crucible, where they are taken off. This happens time and time again until all the impurities are burned off. The pure gold is then poured out into molds. Here our Lord encouraged these believers to buy pure gold from him, spiritual gold, so that they could become spiritually rich.

(2) "I counsel you to buy from me...white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness...." Biblical nakedness after the fall of humanity is a symbol of divine judgment and of humiliation. The city was noted for its black wool textiles and carpets. The Lord's bride thought she was clothed in the city's finest black wool and linen garments, but he said she was naked. His counsel was to buy white robes of righteousness from him. Isaiah the prophet wrote (61:10),

"I delight greatly in the Lord;  
my soul rejoices in my God.

For he has clothed me with garments of salvation  
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."

Our Lord's words to the believers in the church of Sardis were, "He who overcomes will...be dressed in white...." (Revelation 3:5).

(3) "I counsel you to buy from me...salve to put on your eyes, so you can see." Our Lord was counseling them to come to him, for they already knew that when the Messiah came he would bring "recovery of sight for the blind" (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1). Paul had written to the Christians in Ephesus some thirty years earlier, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe" (Ephesians 1:18-19). This prayer is that we know the joy of eternal life now and forever because of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus (see John 17:3; 1 Peter 1:3), know we are the Lord's servants whom he delights to use to his glory and our joy, and know that he has given us the person and the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to do all that he asks of us on this earth and in heaven. The Laodicean Christians had eyes, but they could no longer see the spiritual realities of being in love with Jesus with a full heart.

Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), the brilliant French mathematician, philosopher, and theologian, wrote about this sin of self-sufficiency from God's perspective in his book *Pensées*: (1)

It is I who have made you and I alone can teach you what you are. But you are no longer in the state in which I made you. I created you holy, innocent, perfect, I filled you with light and understanding, I showed you my glory and my wondrous works. Your eye then beheld the majesty of God. You were not in the darkness that now blinds your sight, nor subject to death and the miseries that afflict you. But you could not bear such great glory without falling into presumption. You wanted to make yourself your own center and do without my help. You withdrew from my rule, setting yourself up as my equal in your desire to find happiness in yourself, and I abandoned you to yourself...The senses, independent of reason and often its masters, have carried you off in pursuit of pleasure.

Our Lord went on from this stern but loving word of correction to give...

### **A word of exhortation**

Revelation 3:19:

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

Christ loved his lukewarm bride. The bride was not dead, so there was hope for a full recovery from her lukewarmness of heart. The Greek word for love here is *phileo*, fond or tender affection. Because of Christ's deep love for his bride, he was willing to rebuke her. The word for rebuke (*elegcho*) means to compel a person to see the error of their ways and admit they are wrong. This is not a rebuke that punishes but a rebuke that illuminates from "the Amen," the authoritative source of truth.

Because of his deep love for her, he was also willing to discipline her. The Greek word for discipline is *paideuo*, which means to chasten or train, suggesting the broad idea of education, instruction, or training carried out in grace and firmness. Part of the training includes reproof and admonishment in order to bring about character change. Speaking of the disciplining of sons, the writer to the Hebrews said, "...God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:10-11).

"So be earnest..." This present-tense command indicates that our Lord wanted them to choose to depend on the indwelling Holy Spirit to give them the courage to change their lukewarm heart to one that was once again boiling hot; that is, filled with a zeal and love for their Husband. "...And repent." This is a command to change their minds once and for all regarding their self-sufficiency, their lukewarm relationship with their Husband.

God encouraged his adulterous wife Israel, through his prophet Hosea, a word of great love and compassion in spite of her love for the Baals of Canaan (14:1-5).

"Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God.  
Your sins have been your downfall!

Take words with you  
and return to the Lord.

Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously,  
that we may offer the fruit of our lips...

We will never again say 'Our gods' to what our own hands have made, for in you the  
fatherless find compassion'...

I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.

I will be like the dew to Israel;

he will blossom like a lily.

Like a cedar of Lebanon  
he will send down his roots...."

Stern words of correction and exhortation, and then...

### **A word of encouragement**

Revelation 3:20:

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.

"Hello, is anyone home? Here I am! I stand at the door and knock." This is the most amazing sentence in this letter. For here we have the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of the creation, the Alpha and Omega, the Lord of his church outside his lukewarm bride's door, knocking over and over---waiting, knocking again, waiting, knocking again---with the hope that she has repented of her self-sufficiency so that the Spirit can replace that lukewarmness with a rekindled and passionate love for him. And she must be willing by faith to open the door to the lover of her soul, and invite him back into her heart.

Then Jesus offered loving fellowship: "If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." This is a very personal invitation to those within the church who were struggling with the sin of lukewarmness produced by self-confidence and self-sufficiency. Our Lord, rather than trying to force his way into their heart, chose to stand outside, and with a gentle knock and a tender, loving voice, encourage his beloved to open the door. Once they had the faith to open the door, our Lord said, he would like to come into their home and have a long evening meal seasoned with loving fellowship. It sounds like a foretaste of the great "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9), but in this picture we see that our Lord wants to come back into our hearts as the lover of our soul and as our Lord. And when he comes in he brings three presents: gold, new white robes, and eye salve. When he comes into our hearts, our life becomes one with his, and his will becomes our will from that day on and forevermore. Our life is no longer our own, it has been bought with a price (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Stern and loving words of correction and exhortation, a word of encouragement, and then...

### **A word of promise and exhortation**

Revelation 3:21-22:

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.

The only way to overcome being lukewarm in heart and soul is to repent of your sin and come back into fellowship with your Husband. Jesus promised all who repented of their sin that they would be given the right to sit with him on his throne---a place of authority and conquest. He overcame the temptations of this world and faithfully served his Father with a full heart to such an extent that his Father called him his beloved Son in whom he was well pleased. Jesus willingly laid down his life for us on the cross, resulting in salvation for all who place their faith in him as the Son of God and Savior of the world. If we continue to serve him on this earth with a full heart of love, he will raise us up to serve with him in eternity, just as his Father raised him up to become King of kings (see Revelation 4).

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." As we review the words of encouragement, correction, exhortation, and promise from our Lord to the churches, may we be willing to allow the Spirit to open our ears, our eyes, and our hearts so that we can be the holy people God has called us to be, so that we can be the golden lampstand that faithfully continues to hold up Jesus as the Light of the

world, so the gospel can be seen and heard in a very dark and blinded society.

The book of Revelation begins, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place." When John, the last living apostle, came face-to-face with Jesus for the first time in sixty years, he saw him as the fully glorified Son of God, in full majesty and power. The risen Lord Jesus commissioned John to write on a scroll what he saw and send it to the seven churches in western Turkey: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. In that scroll were words of encouragement, correction, exhortation, and promise from Christ to his bride. These seven churches were a symbol of completeness, enabling Jesus to say everything he needed to say to every church and every individual believer in every generation until he comes again.

Each letter began with a description of Jesus that told the reader of the focus of his evaluation. Here they are again in review: (1) He holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. (2) He is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. (3) He has the sharp, double-edged sword. (4) He is the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. (5) He holds the seven spirits and the seven stars. (6) He is holy and true and holds the key of David. (7) He is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

Here are his words of encouragement: (1) I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance. (2) I know your afflictions and your poverty. (3) I know where you live---where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. (4) I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are doing more than you did at first. (5) I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

Here are his words of correction: (1) You have forsaken your first love. (2) You allow false teachers to lead you into idolatry and sexual immorality. (3) You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who leads you into idolatry and sexual immorality. (4) You are dead. Wake up! (5) You are lukewarm.

Here are his words of exhortation: (1) Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. (2) Be faithful unto death. (3) Repent. (4) Hold on to what you have until I come. (5) Remember what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. (6) I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. (7) Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.

Finally, here are his words of promise to the overcomers, the ones who believed that Jesus Christ was the Son of God and by faith would choose to follow him by the power of the Holy Spirit in the midst of all their trials and temptations. Jesus promised the overcomers that he would give them eternal life, described in the following terms: (1) You will have the right to eat from the tree of life. (2) You will not be hurt by the second death. (3) I will give you some of the hidden manna as well as a white stone with a new name written on it. (4) You will be given authority over the nations, as well as the morning star. (5) You will be dressed in white, and your name will never be blotted out of the book of life. (6) I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God, and I will write the name of my God on you, as well as the name of the new Jerusalem, and my own new name. (7) You will be given the right to sit with me on my throne.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." This is what the Holy Spirit is saying to you and me. This very day!

Note 1. *Devotional Classics*, Richard J. Foster and J.B. Smith, Ed. San Francisco: Harper, 1993, p. 178

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Ron Ritchie  
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