

Revelation 3:14ff – Church in Laodicea

Revelation 3:14-17

¹⁴And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.'¹⁵'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.'

So today, we will look at the worst of the seven churches. Why do I say this? You will understand as we proceed.

How do we define a rich person?

Now the first thing we need to do is to define what that rich is. How rich is rich? Are we talking about billion-dollar rich? Perhaps millionaires? The Bible leaves it open. The point here is that you are rich enough to have no need. Look at the words carefully.

They did not say, "I am rich; I do not need God." It may lead to that, but the problem is they are not aware of their condition. That's why Jesus says, "You do not know!" So the point here is how do you define a rich person? Somebody who has no need. They can afford a relatively secure and comfortable lifestyle in this world. Isn't that what we want? We would like a house. We may not afford a big mansion, but we have enough to buy a decent, modest home. We have enough to buy an economy car. We have enough money to send our children to complete their education. We may not have a high standard of living, but we are satisfied with our lives. So we don't have to be multi-millionaires, but we would love to be well-placed within a middle-class or well-to-do income group. Many people aspire to this kind of lifestyle, knowing that most people are not millionaires.

When you are talking to these wealthy disciples in Laodicea, what would their reasoning be? Typically, "It is God who blessed us with all these riches. It isn't just the work of my hands. That's why we have no need." Can you imagine what it will be like when they come together to pray? They would be thanking God for meeting all their needs. They have their wealth, their health; they have everything. Their lives are basically worry-free! The only problems these people have are perhaps relationship ones such as between husband and wife, parent and children, etc. That's about the only thing they worry about. They do need God because they think He is blessing them with riches, but the point here is, "I need nothing." The keyword is "nothing," no need.

On reflection, we understand this situation today, especially those among us who live in wealthy countries. This terrible disease presents no symptoms. That is why it is such a big problem. It remained undetectable to the Laodicean disciples until Jesus revealed to them in verse 17: "You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked." Imagine their utter shock!

We need to understand this matter in a way that we know how to apply. The immediate question that arises is, what's wrong with riches? We feel we have a strong case when we gain our wealth through

hard and honest work. In addition, to give the benefit of the doubt, they might have contributed to and even participated in the Lord's work. Of course, there are cases where people got rich by deceit and dishonest means. It is they who are condemned and need repentance. But as far as I am concerned, it is honest and hard work. However, notice that Jesus did not say, "You deceitful people; you are deceiving and cheating other people to get rich." Whether they deceive or not, the point is you are rich! The very fact that you are rich and need nothing poses a problem in itself.

The rich fool is preoccupied with himself

This passage reminds us of the parable that Jesus gave in Luke 12:16-21, where the rich fool would say to himself, "Take your ease. Relax! Eat, drink and enjoy!" Well, that's because he got rich, and he got rich by clean, honest, hard work! There is nothing in the parable to suggest that this rich fool is a deceitful person. Yet in Luke 12:20, God said to this man, "Today, your soul is required of you." Why? Because his whole life was centered upon himself. We read the constant repetition of the personal pronoun, "I," from verses 17 to 19: "This is what I will do: I will build this and that, and then relax and enjoy." He was talking to himself all the time. Compare that with Revelation 3:17, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." The whole preoccupation is on oneself, what I want, how to take care of myself and enjoy life. Honest and hard work don't get you off scot-free. So there is a close correspondence between Luke 12 and Revelation 3 as far as the rich are concerned.

Three Aspects of Idolatry

When you look at Revelation 3, there isn't just the question of honest hard work, there's something else in there. If you remember the sessions we had before, we saw three aspects of idolatry.

Three aspects of idolatry in first century Asia

- 1) Religious (Spiritual)
- 2) Social
- 3) Economic

The first has to do with Emperor worship and the worship of other gods. Every citizen is expected to worship the emperor. So if you care for your life and your economic welfare, then you must comply and worship the emperor.

Then the social aspect is also important because you don't want to be marginalized in that society and treated as an outcast. It is so important to maintain your network of friends and your contacts. So if you want to prosper, you've got to keep all your business contacts, yet all these contacts are idolatrous people. We saw the pressure on the disciple of Jesus to join the trade guilds if they wanted to be wealthy.

Now, the third point is included in the second because it has to do with economic benefit. Consequently, the commentators and Bible scholars have noted that for the disciples in Laodicea to become rich, they have to be, in some ways, involved in the trade guilds and some idolatrous practices. If they don't do that, there's no way they can become rich.

Are you living two kinds of life?

Given this situation, you will be living two lives. When you meet with other disciples on Sunday and in the privacy of your own lives, you try to relate to God through Jesus. Then from Monday onwards, when you go back to work, you live the values and priorities of Rome. In other words, you are no different from any others. At work, you live one kind of life, but you live another life at home. That is what Jesus meant. You are trying to mix hot and cold. That is how you become lukewarm, and this is the kind of existence Jesus cannot abide by. That is why Jesus said, "I will vomit you out of my mouth." If you asked what's wrong with richness, you could see its effect. The disciples became lukewarm by trying to live two kinds of life.

In application, if you want to maintain a reasonably decent standard of living, you might be compelled to make some compromise along the way, such as dedicating time and energy to your job at the expense of your relationship with God. Again it doesn't necessarily have to do with a high standard of living. In terms of behavior and pattern of life, the same principle applies. If we have the opportunity to be rich, would you instead let it pass because you want to maintain your commitment and focus on the Lord? We must be sensitive to the Lord first and foremost and to His leading. But if we are rich, we must remember there are some things we need to do to ensure our purity of devotion to Yahweh.

Jesus said, "You are rich materially, but spiritually you are poor."

When you look in the New Testament, you will find many things hard to accept, especially money. Now some people think that I am saying the wrong things. But the burden is still on you. You will need to prove to me that what I have said is wrong. What is more, I didn't write the Bible. So why take it out on me? My job is to explain to you what it means. Then, of course, we need to live what we see right there. We are talking about what Jesus had said. And he was saying to them, "You are rich materially, but spiritually you are poor."

If you want to be spiritually rich, you must be prepared to make sacrifices

Revelation 2:9

⁹" I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan." (ESV)

Jesus says to the disciples at Smyrna, "You are poor, but you are rich," but in the case of Laodicean disciples, "You are rich, but you are poor." So it seems that these two are not compatible. In other words, if we want to be spiritually rich, we must be prepared to make sacrifices. Because if you don't, then you won't have spiritual riches.

The character of the new creation in Jesus is “faithful and true”

Revelation 3:14

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea, write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.’

Now, this has to do with Jesus’ title. The word “Amen” is in Hebrew, and it simply means “faithful and true.” He is faithful to Yahweh, and he is the authentic witness. Whatever he says is in harmony with the character and the person of God. Why did Jesus start like this? It is because he wants to draw a contrast with the disciples in Laodicea. I am true to My Father; you have left the faith. If you are no longer faithful to God, you no longer live the new life He has given you. That is a tragedy!

On the positive note, let us turn to:

2 Corinthians 1:19-20

¹⁹For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

This verse tells us that Jesus is the true promise of God. So whatever God’s promise is, we will find it fulfilled in Christ Jesus so that all the spiritual blessings are in him. Given this reality, is there any reason why we should be drawn to worldly riches when the spiritual blessings of Yahweh are available to us in the risen Christ?

Now, if you look at the remaining words here, “the beginning of God’s creation,” it can also be translated as “the ruler of God’s creation.” Obviously, to rule or govern with Yahweh, it is essential to be faithful and true. Let’s look at this word, “beginning”:

Revelation 1:5

And from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.

Here, “faithful witness” is qualified by “the firstborn of the dead” and then “the ruler of kings.” We have already noticed this word, “ruler” or “beginning” in Rev3:14. This authority is linked to the “firstborn of the dead.”

Revelation 2:8

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: “The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.”

The angel of the church in Smyrna write: “the words of the first and the last, who died and came to life”. Whether we’re talking about the beginning, the ruler and the first, they all have to do with Christ’s resurrection. When Jesus died and was raised from the dead, that was the beginning of the new

creation. The same could be said of Colossians 1:18. Christ, being the beginning or ruler, has to with his resurrection from the dead. Paul is not talking about the old creation at all.

So that leads us to conclude that Christ, who is the first, the beginning and ruler of the new creation, takes place when he was raised from the dead by God the Father. What then is the character of the new creation? Well, it is right there in Rev3:14: faithful and true.

The problem with the Laodicean Church is unfaithfulness

Now all these lead us to question our commitment to God. Have we at any time said to the Lord, "I will be faithful to You," and yet find ourselves unfaithful? Rather, I should say that He finds us unfaithful. The problem with the Laodicean disciples is that their initial "yes" to Yahweh had become "no." That is a very dangerous situation to be in.

The Laodicean Christians has lost their birthright

Now I would like to point out one more thing. We go on to:

Revelation 3:3 and 11

³*Remember, then, **what you received and heard**. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.*

¹¹*I am coming soon. Hold fast **what you have**, so that no one may seize your crown.*

In verse 3, Jesus was speaking to the church in Sardis. He had already said to them, "You have a name of being alive, but you are dead." And then he goes on to say, "Remember what you received and heard." Then notice in verse 11, which concerns the church in Philadelphia, "Hold fast what you have." What then is the problem? Well, the problem is a subtle one; it lies with the Laodiceans.

The reason is that when Jesus said to the church in Sardis, "What you received," they still have it with them. That's why he is telling them to remember what they have received and heard. In verse 11, he said to the church in Philadelphia, "Hold fast what you have," which implies that they still have it with them. So hold fast to that.

Revelation 3:18

¹⁸*I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. (ESV)*

But what about Laodicea? Well, "buy from me gold refined by fire." Why do you need to buy from Jesus? Because you don't have it! How come you don't have it? These are the basics of the spiritual life: spiritual gold, white garments and spiritual sight. Whatever the church had from God in relation to the new creation or new life in Christ, they have completely lost it. That is why I say that this is the worst church of the seven.

The warnings from Hebrews

Hebrews 12:16-17

¹⁶that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

Here is the warning! Esau sold his birthright for a single meal because he wanted to satisfy his hunger. As a result, he lost his spiritual blessing.

God has given His Holy Spirit – the birthright of a disciple

So we have to remember that Yahweh has given us His Holy Spirit. He is the birthright of every disciple. Are you willing to give Him up for something physical? That is the problem with the Laodicean church. They have exchanged the spiritual for the physical. If you want your riches, you will lose everything spiritual. He who loves his life in this world loses it (John12:25). Do you know what happens after they have made the wrong choice?

Laodicean Christians are no longer in communion with Jesus

Revelation 3:20

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

Jesus is outside the church. So you have a church without Jesus. He is not there. The church is no longer in communion with her master. Notice in verse 16, he says, "I want to vomit you out." The church in this condition makes Jesus nauseated. He can't stand it! That's why he is outside of the church. He is knocking at the door, hoping for their repentance and heeding the call to remedy their situation.

Spiritual riches and Material riches incompatible

So if you are looking for God's Presence in Christ and Jesus seems far away, then we have to ask the question, "What is the reason for this?" Maybe it is because I am so contented with my physical existence that I have become spiritually complacent. That is the point I want to say today. By now, we can see that material riches and spiritual riches are not compatible. This is a fundamental principle in Jesus' teaching.

Now I think there are some examples from history, which the Laodicean Christians should have noted. Many scholars believe that Revelation was written in AD 96 or thereabout, and the destruction of the Jewish temple occurred in AD 70.

Learn from History

In Rome, you will find an ancient structure called the Arch of Titus. There is some artwork on the inside of the arch depicting the destruction of the Jewish temple. You can see the Menorah or Lampstand with

its three branches on either side which reminds us of Revelation 2 and 3, where the seven churches are called the seven Lampstands. You can see the bread of the Presence as well. So these two items are depicted, and they were being carried back to Rome as a symbol of Rome's victory and superiority.

God had abandoned the temple

With the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, the Jews understood that God had abandoned the nation. If the Lampstand refers to the people of God, and the bread of the Presence represents God's life, then what has happened is that God has withdrawn His Presence because the people are no longer walking according to His will. They are no longer a worthy witness of Yahweh. How is that so?

There is a museum in Jerusalem called the Burnt House, a remnant of the destruction that took place in Jerusalem when the Romans stormed the city. The burn marks are still visible, and this particular house is said to be the house of Katros, the Priest. Now, it is a fact from archaeology that these priests who served in the temple were wealthy. The articles they found in that house are all high-value articles because they belong to rich people. You can imagine what they were thinking, "We have become rich! We have need of nothing." Added to that, they were also corrupt priests! For example, Jesus in Matthew 21:13, citing Jeremiah 7:11, tells us that they have made the temple a robber's den. So all these are helping us to understand the situation in Jerusalem as well as Laodicea. Had the Laodiceans understood and remembered what transpired twenty-odd years ago, it would have stood as a perennial warning, not just for them but for generations to come.

Now I hope we begin to grasp what it means to follow the Lord and live the new life. If Yahweh or Jesus says to us, "Buy from me," it shows our dire spiritual condition; we have abandoned our new life in Christ. What we had at first, we have lost it. That is why this church is the worst.

Jesus continues to love the Laodicean church and gave them time to repent

If we speak of buying, we have to lose something to get something else. It is not free in the sense that I don't have to give up anything. That's why I said, if you want to be spiritually rich, you must be prepared to make sacrifices. Notice what Jesus said,

Mark 8:35-37

³⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷For what can a man give in return for his soul?

Now please remember, I didn't write these words. I didn't say it either. Jesus said it. So it is no point in saying that this is not right. If this is not right, you take it up with Jesus. You tell him how wrong he is if you dare to do so.

So, Jesus said, "If you lose your life, that is your physical life, for my sake and the gospel, you will save it." Then he goes on to say, "What if you gain the whole world? Even if you can, you will forfeit your soul." In verse 37, he said, "What can a man give in return for his soul?" You see, you cannot buy your

soul or spirit with material things. We can gain it but at the expense of our physical life. There has to be some sacrifice, ready to lose even your physical life for his sake.

Shouldn't the Laodicean disciples know these things? Of course! Otherwise, Jesus wouldn't be talking to them. Since Jesus still considers the Laodicean church as belonging to him, plus the fact that he still loves this church, he wants to bring them back. Why? Because they are in a very precarious situation, there can be persecution at any time, and the possibility of death is very real. So Jesus understands their position and again calls them to return and walk the narrow path.

So they have the opportunity to repent, whereas Esau's situation is entirely different. He has nothing to sacrifice. Because of his hunger, he just wanted the food that Jacob had made. There was no hardship for him, no persecution, just hunger. On his own accord, he voluntarily gave up his birthright to fill his stomach. Hebrews 12:16,17 tell us that he found no chance to repent. So then, the foolishness of trading one's spiritual blessing for momentary physical satisfaction.

As I was thinking about this, I remember many coworkers who could've made a lot of money and yet they gave up the opportunity to do so. They chose to follow the Lord Jesus and serve God with all their hearts and souls. They are willing to serve in places that are not well-developed, thus endangering their health as well.

While I was in Indonesia, I met some coworkers who served in remote areas. They endured hardships for years. Some never got married. Others determined not to have children to serve Yahweh with singular devotion and in all their available time. Some couples who have children are willing to settle in less developed countries. Their children did not go to special schools meant for expatriate families. They went to local schools and integrated into the culture and language of that society.

Compared to first-world conditions, all these constitute some measure of sacrifice due to their choice to go where Yahweh leads. The thought of their willingness to go forth undeterred by the challenges ahead just warms my heart. Indeed, their reward is great!

On the other hand, always remember the deceitfulness of riches. Notice Jesus did not say, "The deceit with which you gain your riches." He simply says, "The deceitfulness of riches."

I hope you will consider or think about the matter seriously. Indeed, we do not want to walk the way of the church in Laodicea.