

The Letter to Laodicea: Complacency—Death by Indifference¹

Maundy Thursday (YrB)

[Psalm 106:1–6, 47–48; Amos 6:1–7; Revelation 3:14–22; John 15:9–17]

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Points to Ponder

1. What was Jesus' main complaint with the Church in Laodicea? Does our congregation ever exhibit this? If so, what do we do in the face of it?
 2. What does it mean when Jesus, in John's Gospel, says, "**You did not choose Me, I chose you ...**"? Does this saying of Jesus bring you comfort or conviction?
 3. How can 'earthly' prosperity get in the way of living out our faith? In what ways can we use the things that make us 'prosperous' a fruit of the faith God has given to us?
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Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father, and our Lord and King, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Let us Pray: Lord Jesus, we admit our complacency, our self-satisfied attitude, our lack of love for You and our neighbors. Forgive us and rekindle in our hearts the fire of Your Holy Spirit. In Your holy name we pray. Amen.

Listen up! I am Martus, an angel on special assignment from the Lord Jesus Christ to your church. I wish that there was a nice way for me to tell you this, but there just is not. So, I will be blunt. The Lord Jesus is disgusted with you. He is nauseated to the point of vomiting. There, I have said it.

The apostle John has given me a letter from Christ that I will share with you. It outlines the reasons for our Lord's displeasure.

You wonder why He is upset. After all, your congregation at Laodicea is the picture of success. Your community is thriving, situated as it is at the intersection of several major trade routes. You are the provincial capital. The black wool from your sheep and the woven garments you make are widely sought after.

You have a famous medical school, as well as a temple to the god of healing. Ointments for curing diseases of the eyes and ears are made in Laodicea. Emperor worship has reached your city and continues to grow in popularity. Prosperous, educated, religious, important – no wonder so many people want to live in Laodicea.

¹ Worship & Sermon resources for this series: *Revelation for Lent*, Donald H. Neidigk, (Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, 2004)

As a congregation, you seem not to be plagued with the moral and doctrinal troubles of your sister congregations. One could not describe you as idolatrous or immoral or tempted to compromise the Christian faith. In fact, a visitor to your church might remark, "What a lovely congregation and what nice people. How prosperous and peaceful things seem." Even the name of your city, Laodicea, might imply that you are a people of righteousness.

There is only one problem, one deadly flaw. You are so self-satisfied that you have no use for Christ. He is everything, yet to you, Christ is nothing. He is the "Amen," the only certainty, yet your certainty lies within yourselves. He is the faithful and true witness, the martyr, which is the origin of my name, Martus. Christ died to save you from every evil and give you His righteousness, and you think you have done it yourselves.

Christ is the source of all creation, without whom nothing would exist, and you have the gall to pat yourselves on the back and say, "We did it all ourselves." You smile smugly at your good fortune and say, "**I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.**"² And you wonder why Jesus is about to throw up! You neither love Him nor despise Him; you neither call on Him nor send Him away.

You remind me of the rich farmer in Jesus' parable. His ground produced such a huge crop that he had no place to store it. So, he pulled down his old barns and built bigger ones, telling himself, "**I have plenty of good things laid up for many years. I'll take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.**"³ But God said to him, "**You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.**"⁴ The farmer went to bed complacent, satisfied, selfish; he woke up, damned to hell.

Laodicea, this is not what God wants for you. Repent! Come back to Jesus! You think you are rich, but you are poor in what matters: humility and faith. You think you can see because of your fine doctors and your eye medications, but you are blind to your own sin and helplessness.

You think that because you are dressed in the finest woollens your craftspeople can make that you are clothed. But without Christ you are naked of any righteousness, shameful in your sins.

Repent! Come back to Jesus! Do you not realize that you are destitute of all you think you have? Those things you boast of now are but a passing illusion of well-being. Jesus, the only certainty, Jesus, the source of all creation, has come to meet your needs with real treasure.

Through His victory over Satan, Jesus has won for you the golden streets of heaven. Through His blood spilled at Calvary, Jesus has won for you the white garments of His righteousness. Through His Holy Spirit, Jesus has taken away the blindness of your soul, enabling you to see His glory, glory that makes all else pale in comparison.

² Revelation 3:17

³ Luke 12:19

⁴ Luke 12:20

Christ's words to you have been harsh, difficult for me to say, and difficult for you to accept. But they are spoken in love. The Lord Jesus says, **"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline."**⁵

If He did not love you, He would not have died for you. If He did not love you, He would not have sent missionaries and pastors to share His Gospel with you. If He did not love you, He would not have made you His children in Holy Baptism. If He did not love you, He would not invite you to pray "Our Father in heaven." If He did not love you, He would not have inspired an old man who is suffering on an island to write you this letter. If He did not love you, He would not have sent me, His angel, to bring you this message, begging you to repent and return to Him. If He did not love you, He would not care a whit about the danger you face. But He does care.

Jesus loves you. He died for you. This is His church. He says to you, His blood-bought people, **"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."**⁶

Jesus is knocking now. He is calling this congregation, each member of this congregation, by name. Soon you will be celebrating His Holy Supper. You will break bread and pour wine. You will repeat the words "This is My body" and "This is My blood," given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This is a means of grace for you. Here you find the forgiveness of sins, including your sin of apathy.

Now, before the Holy Meal, is the time to remember Christ who has always committed Himself to you. As St. Paul tells you, now, before you eat of the bread and drink of the cup, now is the time for self-examination.

Today Jesus calls you to admit again to yourself and to God your sin and helplessness. Recognize that no good thing, despite all the trappings of success, dwells in you. Acknowledge that all you have and are comes not of your own effort but from God. Repent of your lukewarm faith. As you do, the Holy Spirit, by means of the Word and Sacraments, will set a fire within you, moving you to bold acts that confess God's love for you, reflect your love for God, and pour out God's love and the Gospel on your neighbor.

As you repent, you will lose nothing but your sin and guilt. In their place will be a peace of mind and heart as fresh as a spring morning after the rain. You will gain precious promises from Jesus: **"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."**⁷

But you will have nothing to boast about as we are reminded from John's Gospel what Jesus said: **"You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in My name, He may give it to you."**⁸

⁵ Revelation 3:19

⁶ Revelation 3:20

⁷ Revelation 3:21

⁸ John 15:16

You will have nothing to boast about because the victory that gains the throne of heaven has been won for you by Jesus and becomes yours by faith. Do not delay!

So, what will Laodicea do? Some of you will heed your Lord's call. Two-and-a-half centuries from now, your church will still be here, moderately important, led by your own bishop. A church council will meet here to publish a document called "The Canons of Laodicea." In its sixty chapters, you will make pronouncements about various heresies, when to celebrate Easter, the proper form of the liturgy, and how to observe Lent. You will even offer a list of all the books you feel should be included in the Bible – though you will not mention the Book of Revelation and its Letter to Laodicea.

Well, I have done my part, given my witness to the word of Christ as my name, Martus, calls me to do. But I had better be going because the temperature seems to be rising in here. It could be the flush that follows a justified rebuke, or, as I pray it is, the Holy Spirit is kindling a renewed flame of faith in your hearts and minds that you would be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations. Amen.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."⁹ Amen.

⁹ Romans 15:13