

## **The Deceived Church**

**Revelation 3:14-22**

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1 Cor. 3:19 – the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God.

Eph 1:17-18

that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. NASU

The final address to churches in Revelation is to the church at Laodicea. This city was well known for its wealth and its medical community. The plains surrounding the city were especially adequate for raising sheep. The variety of sheep raised around the city of Laodicea was famous for their fine black wool. The garments made from this fine wool demanded a good price. After the earthquake of 17 AD that destroyed many of the cities in the surrounding area, Laodicea needed no help from the Roman government to rebuild. She had a strong banking and industrial base to compliment her medical community.

There was a temple in Laodicea dedicated to the worship of the god of health and healing known as Aesculapius. The temple was rather elaborate with a medical school attached. One product coming from this community was known as Phrygian powder and was most often used as a salve for the eyes. Another ointment was made for the ears. Each of the economic streams of the city was countered by condemnations from the Lord.

Verse 14 identifies the church receiving the letter and an identifier of the sender unique to this church. You will recall that each of the churches of Revelation received a letter with a particular character trait of God as relating to the specific church. For Laodicea, the identifier of Christ is the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the Creation of God. The emphasis here is on truth as in opposition to falsehood or deception. Jesus is about to speak to them with discernment. He is not to cover anything up but as the one who was the beginning of Creation. This speaks of His infinite wisdom and understanding of the universe in general and man in particular. Without question, Jesus knows their deeds and their true motives.

### **Ineffectiveness**

The nearby city of Colassae was known for its hot water springs. Just as Americans used to travel to Hot Springs, Arkansas to soak in the hot springs for therapeutic reasons; so the citizens of the Middle East traveled to Colossae. The hot springs were thought to have healing properties. Another city nearby was the city of Hieropolis which was known for its cool water springs. These cool water springs were recognized as bringing refreshment. The implications of

Jesus charge of the lukewarmness of the church at Laodicea seem to be clear; she was neither a refreshment nor a healing.

John Newport describes this lukewarmness as complacency, self-satisfaction, and indifference to the real issues of faith and discipleship. Jesus describes it as sickening. Jesus established his church to be a healing to an unbelieving world. In order to fulfill such a purpose, the church would have to be about the work of God in a relationship with the living God. It requires a vibrant spirituality based on divine revelation and authentic faith. In addition to providing healing for troubled souls, the church is to also provide refreshment. No doubt living in this world man will have trouble. His mind will be deceived and he will grow weary. The church is to be an instrument of divine healing and divine refreshment. Any church that finds itself as neither a refreshment nor a healing finds herself under the divine warnings of this letter. It seems as though this is a measure that can be applied to each New Testament church.

### **Deception**

The church at Laodicea was ineffective because she was deceived. You will notice the contrasts of verses 17 and 18. The Laodiceans say they are rich and because of their wealth they need nothing. Jesus contrasted this condition saying they were wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked. They say of themselves they are in need of nothing. Perhaps this is a reference to their “pick themselves up by their bootstraps” mentality that followed the great earthquake. They had rebuilt the city without assistance and had again accumulated a great wealth by earthly standards. But it was all a deception. The deception of material riches had left this church in a city with great material wealth without an effective ministry. They had so much yet in reality they had so little. The only other time the word wretched is used in the entire Bible was when Paul used it in Romans 7 to describe his helplessness in dealing with the flesh. He said, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? The term indicates helplessness and surely in their deception, the Laodiceans were unable to help themselves. They thought they were on a plain of satisfaction and utopia, when in reality they were miserable. Their continued striving for more was really a lack of satisfaction and a feeling of misery. Their poverty refers to the absence of spirituality and their nakedness describes their witness to the world. Even pagans knew they had no substance to their religion. They had been exposed. Finally, they were blind. This is a reference to their lack of spiritual understanding even though the salve they needed was near all the time. Truly they were deceived.

### **Divine Wisdom**

In the evangelical world, we often speak of redemption and regeneration. We are correct to be well aware from a cognitive and experiential basis of the great changes God brings when he regenerates a soul. However, we must also look to God’s Word for the promise given and the outcome of walking by faith according to those promises. This kind of living is often called

wisdom. In verse 18 Jesus turns the tide and tells them of three elements to living in such wisdom.

The first element of wisdom is identifying true riches. He tells us these riches can only be obtained by purchase from God and it is a gold refined by fire. Malachi and Ezekiel both tell us of God's refining fire. The picture is one of the process used to separate pure gold from the impurities found in its natural form. The process is often used for silver and other precious metals as well. The metal is heated until it becomes liquid. The impurities rise to the surface and are removed with a ladle. Jesus is likely reminding them a life refined by the Heavenly refiner is in the course of life. Although seeking knowledge and wisdom through reading is valuable, it is only applicable when lived out in the crucible of life. He is speaking directly to the focus and direction of their lives. They must move their focus from the riches of this life to the riches of heaven.

The second element of wisdom has to do with their outer garments. Here Jesus is not literally referring to their clothes but to their testimony. He contrasts the black wool garments of the region of Laodicea to the white garments symbolizing purity. The garments of purity come only through a life of humility before the Lord. The one who lives a life of humility in relationships with God and others will be clothed with the righteousness of God. As a result they will not expose the nakedness that comes from pride and arrogance. The first two elements of a life of wisdom are focus on the things of God and live in humility.

The third element of a life of wisdom is to purchase an eye salve from the Lord that would give them the ability to see the deception of the enemy. This eye salve is no doubt purchased in living relationship with God. It comes by living a life of humility that makes a person seek God's wisdom at every juncture of life. The logical contrast here is between a heavenly eye salve and the one that was produced locally in the pagan medical temples and marketed around the world. While this local eye salve may have had medicinal value, it would not grant these believers in Christ the discernment they needed to overcome the deceptions of the enemy. Satan had built systems of deception in the region and the culture was so blended that it was difficult for believers to know the truth. We find ourselves living in such a time and such a culture. We also need the eye salve anointed by the Lord for discernment. I believe a steady diet of worship, time in the Word of God, and prayer are three exercises of spiritual discipline that can grow us continually in this element of living a life of wisdom.

### **Time Remains**

Recently I encountered a young lady in her early twenties who was realizing her life is a wreck. She was actually seeking pity from others over her current situation. Imagine that, early twenties, full of life, most of her life out in front of her, and yet she felt like there was no hope for her situation. As we read the Bible or hear some convicting preaching, we may feel as this young lady felt. It may seem as though we are so far from the mark of God that achieving those

heavenly challenges is impossible. There is good news from the Word. Change is but a repentance away. The God of heaven is the one who can and will provide the discipline needed to turn a life of debauchery and ungodliness into a life of wisdom bearing the marks of the everlasting life promised by God's Word. Notice in verse 19 of our text, Jesus speaks of his love, his correction through reproof, his discipline, and the need of repentance.

Jesus also extends the invitation. Verse 20 is the famous verse that has often been used in evangelistic messages to call lost sinners to Christ. That interpretation is actually out of context because here the Word is to the church and the call is to believers. Believers do not always live the life of wisdom described earlier. The picture of Jesus standing at the door knocking speaks of His willingness to apply divine discipline in an intimate and loving manner. The Middle Eastern culture placed a high value on relationships and for someone to come to dinner was an opportunity to grow in intimacy. The promise is a desirable one. Jesus is waiting on the invitation to teach us a life of wisdom with the greatest intimacy and compassion. Repentance is the hinge that swings open the door of God's divine wisdom. Repentance requires the humility we spoke of earlier.

In addition to earthly benefits, there remain the heavenly benefits. As with the letters to the other churches, Jesus reminds his readers of heaven, the judgment throne of God, and the glorious position of the redeemed in His kingdom. Let us seek the life of wisdom God desires for us and let us take hold of the promise of a life of wisdom along with the promise of a special seat in His kingdom.