

Lesson 12

When we ended last week, we had started looking at the letter to the church in Philadelphia, known as the *loyal* church.

In verse 10, Jesus promises to keep these Christians from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. What does that mean?

First, as we will soon see, the phrase “them that dwell upon the earth” is used in Revelation to describe those opposed to the church. Those in the church are pictured as dwelling in heaven even while they remain on the earth. That usage reminds us of something Paul wrote.

Colossians 3:2-3 — Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

The promise in verse 10 is a promise to all faithful Christians of that time — it is a promise that the coming judgment against Rome would **not** be a judgment against them.

But is verse 10 also a promise that the Christians would not **suffer** during that judgment? Not necessarily. We again need to see things from God’s perspective. God always has our *eternal* life in mind, while we sometimes focus only on our *earthly* life, which God tells us is like a vapor that vanishes away.

Jesus’ promise in verse 10 to **keep** these Christians did not necessarily mean they would be spared from suffering. In Ezekiel 9:1-8, God promised to *keep* his people, yet in Ezekiel 21:3-4, they experienced suffering and death. God provides **spiritual** deliverance. Once again we need to see things the way God sees things — we need spiritual eyes and a spiritual perspective.

But if Christians suffered during the judgment of Rome, how can the promise in verse 10 be true? My answer to that question is to point us back to two important words in verse 8 — “I know.”

Jesus knows who are his people and who are not his people.

John 10:14 — I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep.

2 Timothy 2:19 — *Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.*

And as for the innocent suffering during a judgment from God, here's a question: did children die in the great flood? Yes. Were those children being judged by the great flood? No. But they all died so, some might ask, what difference did it make? It made every difference imaginable! Why? Again, those same two words from the mouth of Christ — "I know!" We have a righteous and all-knowing judge.

In verse 11, Jesus tells them he will come quickly. We are still in the same time frame that we saw in the opening verses of the book. God's judgment against the Roman persecutors was coming soon.

We talked earlier about the false Calvinistic teaching of one saved, always saved, and we saw how that idea was disproved by the fact that one's name can be blotted out of the book of life. We see in verse 11 another clear refutation of that false teaching.

Can we lose our crown of life? Yes, according to verse 11. We can fail to hold fast to it, and we can let someone else take it from us. How? We can follow their false teaching as they lead us astray, or we can yield to temptation and follow them to do evil. The lesson is clear — we must hold fast to what we have so that our crown will not be taken from us and our name will not be blotted out of God's book.

Verse 12 is a beautiful promise, and particularly so to the church in Philadelphia. They had been hit by a terrible earthquake that crumbled the pillars in their buildings and caused them to live outside the city in tents away from the buildings. Jesus tells them, "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out."

Ramsay: "The city which had suffered so much and so long from instability was to be rewarded with the Divine firmness and steadfastness."

What does it mean in verse 12 to write these **three** names on a Christian — the name of God, the name of the city of God, and the new name of Christ?

Why do you write your name on something you own? So that you won't lose it, and so that others will know that thing belongs to you. I think the answer is the same here.

2 Timothy 2:19 — *Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.*

Christians belong to God. Christians are citizens of the church (the new Jerusalem). Christians belong to Christ. They have a special relation with Christ. God claims us as his own special people (1 Peter 2:9) when he writes his name on us.

Later in this book we will see people with someone else's name written on them. And we will see Christians pictured as having the name of the Lamb and of the Father written on them to distinguish them from those opposed to Christ and wearing someone else's name.

I have made the point before that the "church of Christ" is our description, not our name. That is why we often write "church" with a lower case "c." We are the church that belongs to Christ — the church of Christ. He has written his name on us!

Most people out in the world see us as just another denomination, and they think that "Church of Christ" is our name, just as some other group might call themselves a "Baptist Church" or a "Methodist Church." Here is a good way to start a conversation with such a person:

The story was told of a large, prominent denomination in town that was raising money from community businesses to build a new building. They approached a business man who was a Christian, and he made them an offer. "I will give you \$1000 if you put up a sign in front saying 'This is a church of Christ.'" "We can't do that," they said, "this is a [BLANK] church" (where the blank was filled in with the name of a local denomination). "Well," the Christian business man responded, "I'll still give you a \$1000 if you will put up a sign saying 'This is NOT a church of Christ.'"

Would they be willing to put up such a sign? Would they be willing to announce to the world that they are not a church that belongs to Christ?

When you understand that story, you understand the non-denominational nature of the church! It's really not that hard. We belong to Christ Jesus, and Christ Jesus has written his name on us! We are the Lord's church!

The new Jerusalem in verse 12 is the church, the city of God — the dwelling place of God and God's people. In place of the old city of Jerusalem, where the

people of God once dwelt, there is now a *new* Jerusalem where the people of God now dwell — and that new Jerusalem is the church.

Notice that the new Jerusalem in verse 12 comes down out of heaven from God. As Daniel told us in Daniel 2, Jesus tells us here — the church is not a product of man. It is the eternal kingdom not made with human hands. It was created and established by God.

Psalm 127:1 — Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.

That verse should be placed as a warning on the front sign of every denomination!

And one thing we know with certainty from verse 12 — the new Jerusalem is **not** heaven. How do we know that? Because verse 12 tells us that the new Jerusalem **comes down out of heaven**. They must be two separate things for that to be true. We should also keep that same distinction in mind when we get to 21:2 — “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down from God out of heaven**, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

Why does Jesus refer in verse 12 to his “new name”? What does that mean? We discussed that before — to have a new name means that you have a new status. We saw that on earth when Octavian became the Emperor Augustus. But that was nothing compared with what Jesus had done. He had come to this earth, lived a perfect life, and finished the task God had given him. Jesus now reigns as king over all creation and over his eternal kingdom of prophecy that was established in Acts 2. The new name in verse 12 belonged to Christ — not to any earthly ruler.

Revelation 3:14-22

The Letter to Laodicea

14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; 15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold

or hot. 16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. 17 Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: 18 I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. 19 As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. 21 To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. 22 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Laodicea was the only congregation about which Jesus had nothing good to say about their present condition. The Laodicean church is the only one of the seven churches that is absolutely and wholly condemned. Not even a faithful remnant is left that kept itself pure and white as in Sardis, the dead church.

But even here there was hope. Jesus says in 3:19 that he loves them, and Jesus suggests in 3:21 that they could still overcome if they repented. But there is no suggestion here that such would occur.

Doesn't it tell us a lot about our Savior that he saved this letter for last? He had nothing good to say, and so he was not in any hurry to get to them. He wanted to have something good to say about them!

According to Calvin, some people were created just to fuel the fires of hell. Does that sound anything like the God we serve? Does that sound anything at all like the God we read about in the Bible?

Ezekiel 33:11 — Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

Jesus had nothing good to say about Laodicea, and it seems he was in no hurry to get to them!

Here is how Ramsay begins his description of Laodicea:

There is no city whose spirit and nature are more difficult to describe than Laodicea. There are no extremes, and hardly any very strongly marked features. But in this even balance lies its peculiar character. Those were the qualities that contributed to make it essentially the successful trading city, the city of bankers and finance, which could adapt itself to the needs and wishes of others, ever pliable and accommodating, full of the spirit of compromise.

The city of Laodicea was founded in 250 BC by Antiochus II and named after his wife, Laodice, whom he later divorced.

The city was positioned on the most important road in Asia, which connected Ephesus to Syria. This road made the city a great commercial and strategic center. The peace provided by Rome allowed Laodicea to flourish.

Laodicea was proud and felt that it had need of nothing. When the city was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 61, the people refused Roman help and rebuilt the city on their own.

It was one of the wealthiest cities in the world and was a center of banking and finance — yet Jesus told them in verse 17 that they were **poor**.

The city was a center of clothing manufacture and was famous for its soft, violet-black, glossy wool — yet Jesus told them in verse 17 that they were **naked**.

The city was a medical center and housed a medical school that was famous for its ointment for the eyes and ears — and yet Jesus told them in verse 17 that they were **blind**.

This congregation was proud and contented — and Jesus did not have a single good thing to say about them! He told them in verse 18 that if they wanted to be truly rich, truly clothed, and truly able to see, then they must come to him for those things.

Those in Smyrna were destitute, and Jesus told them in 2:9 that they were rich. These people in Laodicea were rich, and yet Jesus tells them that they are destitute. How often is the truth just the opposite of what men believe?

***Proverbs 13:7** — There is that maketh himself rich,
yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor,
yet hath great riches.*

Once again we see a familiar theme of this book. **Things are not what they seem! We must always strive to see things as God sees them!**

In verse 14, Jesus is referred to as “the Amen.” What does that mean?

It is likely pointing us back to Isaiah 65:16, which in the KJV speaks of the “God of truth,” but literally is “the God of the Amen.” As we know, the word “amen” is an acknowledgment that something is valid and binding. So, when applied to a person, it indicates someone who is trustworthy — someone whose word is valid and binding. That view is confirmed by what follows next — Jesus is the “the faithful and true witness.” These titles present a sharp contrast between the trustworthiness of Christ and the unfaithfulness of the Laodicean church.

The description of Christ in verse 14 as “the beginning of the creation of God” refers to Jesus as the *source* of the creation. Jesus is God, and he was there from the beginning (John 1:1-3). Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). It was by Jesus that God made the worlds (Hebrews 1:2). Nowhere in the Bible are we ever told to worship any part of God’s creation, yet we are told to worship Christ. Jesus was not created, but rather Jesus is the source of all creation.

***Colossians 1:16** — For by him were all things created,
that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and
invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or
principalities, or powers: all things were created by
him, and for him.*

That connection between Colossians 1:16 and Revelation 3:14 is interesting.

Laodicea was located in the Lycus valley. Two other cities in that valley are mentioned in the New Testament: Hierapolis and Colossae. By the time the letter to the Colossians was written, there were churches in all three of these cities (Colossians 4:13). Colossians 4:16 tells us there was an “epistle from Laodicea.”

Many commentators believe that the reason Colossians 1:16 and Revelation 3:14 are so similar is that they were addressed to similar and related situations. They suggest that the peculiar mixture of Judaism and Gnosticism that was a problem in Colossae was also a problem in Laodicea, and, if so, it seems to have perhaps been a greater problem in Laodicea.

Commentators differ widely on their interpretation of verses 15-16: “thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.”

Let’s start with what most **agree** on — most agree that the references to cold water, hot water, and lukewarm water are based on actual water conditions in and around Laodicea. And that makes sense. We have already seen how many of Jesus’ statements in these letters are based on features of the cities in which the congregations were located.

One thing is known for sure about Laodicea from the extra-Biblical sources: Laodicea had a problem with its water supply. Excavation of the city’s terra cotta pipes reveal thick lime deposits, which suggest heavy contamination in the water supply.

Laodicea lacked its own water supply, having no direct access to the cold water of the mountains or the hot water of the nearby springs in Hierapolis to the north. In contrast to its claims to self-sufficiency, Laodicea had to pipe in its water. Although much of the aqueduct from the south was underground, nearer the city it came through stone barrel pipes, which made it vulnerable to any intended besiegers who wished to cut off the city’s water supply. More important, this water had grown lukewarm by the time of its arrival to the city. Colossae, by contrast, had a perpetual supply of cold water from the mountains. And where the water of Hierapolis was hot and mineral laden, the water of Laodicea was lukewarm and mineral laden. As a result, we are told that Laodicea became well known for its tepid and revolting water, which almost everyone found repulsive.

So where is the big disagreement about verses 15-16? The big disagreement can be summed up in this way: Was the **cold** water intended to represent a **good** thing or a **bad** thing? Our answer to that question will then determine our view about the point Jesus was making in these two verses — was Jesus condemning the Laodiceans for not being **decisive**, or was Jesus condemning them for not being **useful**?

Let's look at each of those two possibilities.

For many years, the most common view was that the hot and the cold in verse 15 refers to the people's spiritual condition.

The Greek word used for "hot" (which occurs only here) is *zestos*. That word has the same root word as the Greek word for "fervent," as in the phrase "fervent in spirit," which we find in Acts 18:25 and in Romans 12:11.

The Greek word used here for "cold" is more difficult — it is not used elsewhere to describe a spiritual condition. In fact, the only other place it is found is in Matthew 10:42, where it describes cold water. (Another word for "cold" is used in Matthew 24:12 to describe those whose love shall wax cold.)

The biggest problem some see with this view is Jesus' statement in verse 15: "I would thou wert cold or hot." Why, they ask, would Jesus ever want someone to be spiritually cold? Two responses.

First, it is logically incorrect to read verse 15 and conclude that Jesus wants anyone to be spiritually cold. Jesus doesn't like cold or lukewarm Christians — he just prefers one over the other. Cold is bad, but it is not as bad as lukewarm.

Second, as to why lukewarm is worse than cold — ask yourself this question: who has done more harm to the church — those within or those without? And a related question — why does the media react with such undisguised glee when they are able to show the hypocrisy of someone who claims to be a Christian and yet has been caught in some terrible sin?

The lukewarm Christian was then and is now the curse of the church. How often has the "hypocrites in the church" complaint been used as an excuse against the gospel call. (Yet I recall what Marion Williams once said in response to that complaint: "I had rather spend an hour with those hypocrites on Sunday than an eternity with them in hell!")

A lukewarm Christian is not actively against Christ — instead, his carefree attitude shows no concern for Christ, and he does great damage to the Lord's

body. Do we have any lukewarm Christians here? Most congregations do — but you rarely find them in Sunday school!

We might be tempted to think that a cold Christian would be worse than a lukewarm Christian, but not according to Jesus. At least the cold Christian has made a decision — it was the wrong decision, but at least he has acted. The cold Christian has left the church. But not so with the lukewarm Christian. They hang around and cause all sorts of trouble.

We can look to the denominational world for an example of hot, cold, and lukewarm. In a recent vote to ordain a gay bishop in the Episcopalian religious group (**not** “church”), some voted yes and some voted no. But did you notice that there were also two abstentions? I have more respect for those that voted yes than for those who abstained, which is not to say that I have much respect for either group!

Perhaps the message of verse 15 is that Jesus would rather us be actively opposed to him than for us to say we are on his side and yet live a life of total indifference to his will.

So what then is the **other view** of verses 15-16? The other view is that the cold water is not intended by Jesus to refer to spiritually cold people, but is instead intended to refer to one of two ways in which water can be useful — water can be hot or water can be cold, and each is useful — hot water for bathing and cold water for drinking. But of what use is lukewarm water? None.

Under this second view, Jesus’ criticism in verses 15-16 is not that the church is indecisive (unable to decide whether they are for or against Christ), but rather that the church is ineffective and not useful to God.

So which view is correct? I once strongly preferred the first view, but today I would have to say I’m not sure which view is correct. Both views make fair criticisms of the church in Laodicea — it was unwilling to make a stand for Jesus, preferring instead to keep one foot in the church and one foot in the world. But it was also ineffective and not useful to God. In fact, those two things go together, which is why it is hard to choose between these two views.

Perhaps the ambiguity is here for a reason. Perhaps Jesus wanted us to draw both of these lessons from these two verses. Whichever view we choose, on this we can all agree — we do not want to ever be in the lukewarm category!

Were these people without hope? Not at all. Verse 19 tells us that Jesus wanted them to repent. Verse 20 pictures Jesus as standing at the door of his own church and knocking. Jesus wanted to be let back in to his own church!

2 John 9 — *Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God.*
[ESV]

Ezekiel 23:35 — *Therefore thus saith the Lord God; Because thou hast forgotten me, and cast me behind thy back, therefore bear thou also thy lewdness and thy whoredoms.*

It seems many religious groups today have forgotten God in their attempt to go on ahead of God, and in doing so they have cast the word of God behind their backs.

The letter to Laodicea has a message for the church of any age, but that message is particularly strong for the modern Christian. One commentator writes:

Perhaps none of the seven letters is more appropriate to the 20th century church than this. It describes vividly the respectable, sentimental, nominal, skin-deep religiosity that is so widespread among us today. Our Christianity is flabby and anemic. We appear to have taken a lukewarm bath of religion.

I mentioned Marion Williams a moment ago. One of her favorite authors was the Scottish theologian George MacDonald (1824-1905). He was a Scottish preacher, and C.S. Lewis once said that he never wrote a book in which he did not quote MacDonald. Here is what George MacDonald had to say about the Laodiceans:

You must note that in this last message to the Laodiceans, he has not a word of praise for them—not a word of praise. Almost all the rest have some praise given them, but there is not a word of praise for these halfhearted Laodiceans. They want to go comfortably on, and not to be troubled much, and they will get into heaven as they please, in some sleepy way or other.

Neither cold nor hot: What a word almost of contempt! Only there is no contempt in Him. Using our language it sounds like it, but I call it “indignation,” and the strong effort of His heart of love to make them feel what a low condition they are in. “Neither cold nor hot—I won’t have you; I will spew you out of my mouth.” That Christ should speak like that to us and we deserve it—who will endure it? But, oh! it is of the mercy of God that He speaks to us like that.

He speaks very plainly what He thinks of them, and He shows very clearly how His thought about them ran counter altogether to their own judgment of themselves. “Oh, we are all right! We accept this and that doctrine; we believe so-and-so; we are all right.” Or, on the other hand: “We have broken free from the traditions of the elders; we have got a better way, and so we are all right.” Are you doing the things that Jesus Christ tells you? If not, you are all wrong. Your ideas, your opinions, your systems, let them be as correct as astronomy, and you are no better, but probably much the worse for them.

It’s hard to think of much that needs to be added to that description of this sad letter to the Laodicean congregation.

We ask again — was their situation hopeless? Not at all. Jesus still loved them, as we see in verse 19. In fact, that is why Jesus was telling them these things that they needed to hear, as we also see in verse 19. If they repented, they could still overcome and reign with Christ, as we see in verse 21.

And when we have trouble overcoming, verse 21 reminds us where we should look — we should look to Jesus, the perfect example of one who overcame. “I also overcame,” Jesus tells us.

We said the Laodiceans were not useful to God, and they were not, but as with so many things, God can turn evil into something good, and he did so with this congregation. What is that good thing that God created? He created this letter, which forever serves as a warning to others that they should not follow the example of the Laodiceans. Perhaps it just proves the old adage that, for some of us, it may be that our purpose in life is just to serve as a warning to others!

And one last thing about the Laodiceans — think for a moment about the place of this letter in the entire book of Revelation. In the verses that immediately follow this letter, John will see a wonderful vision about Christ’s love and care for his victorious church. Rome will be weighed in the scales and found wanting. And would Laodicea take part in that great victory? Not unless they repented. If they stayed as they were, they would sit on the sideline as Jesus and his church went by without them. What could be more sad than that! To have come so close, and yet fallen short!

The church in Laodicea is known as the *lukewarm* church, but perhaps a better shorthand description for them would be the *losing* church — the church that fell short and missed out on the great victory.

Conclusion to Chapters 2-3

So where are we at the end of Chapter 3? What is next for John?

The letters to the seven churches are complete. Each church was challenged to overcome.

The situation looks bleak at this point in history. The church seems unable to resist the hostile worldly powers that surround it. But, history is not determined by political powers. As we are about to see, history is determined by God.

The question now is, what will be the fate of God's enemies and what will be the fate of God's people?

Satan, as usual, will try to thwart God's will, and Satan's goal as always is to extinguish the church. But with regard to Rome, Satan's time is short!

Revelation 12:12** — Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, **because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.

The book of Revelation is a book of judgment. In the first part of the book, Christ pronounces judgments against the church's enemies from within. In the second part of the book, Christ will pronounce judgments against the church's enemies from without. What comparisons can we see between these two judgments?

In each case, Jesus tells his listeners that the way they see themselves is really the opposite of the way they really are! One church thought it was rich; Jesus said they were poor. One church thought it was poor; Jesus said they were rich. Rome thought it had all the power; Jesus will tell them that they are powerless. Rome thought the church was of no consequence; Jesus will tell them that the church is infinitely more powerful and more important than Rome.

There is a message in here for us as well. To see ourselves correctly, we must see ourselves as God sees us, and the best way to do that is to see ourselves through the word of God.

As scarce as truth is, the supply has always exceeded the demand. Jesus likely gave some of these people more truth than they wanted! They no doubt did not enjoy seeing themselves through God's eyes. They would much rather have heard pleasant things from Christ, but Christ told them the truth, which is what they desperately needed to hear.

This situation is not new. Consider:

Jeremiah 5:30-31 — *A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?*

Isaiah 5:20 — *Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!*

Isaiah 30:9-11 — *That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the Lord: Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits: Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us.*

How do we find out today what we **need** to hear? We quit listening to man and the world, and we start reading God's word. He has told us all that we need to hear. Our job is to listen to that message and then to heed that message.

One final comment about the seven letters — each of them begins with the same phrase: "I know." We understand that Jesus is the head of the church, but sometimes we act like he is a distant monarch. These letters paint a very different portrait of our king.

Jesus is intimately concerned about his church. The Bible describes the church as the body of Christ and as the bride of Christ. Jesus knows what is going on in his church, and he cares very deeply about what is going on in his church — and that should be a great source of comfort for us today when the church seems to be in such turmoil all around the world. Does Jesus care? Yes, he cares. I know he cares. Jesus knows what is happening in his church.