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 Revelation 3:14-22
 Ninth Message
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POOR AND NEEDY

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

Today we come to the last of the seven messages addressed by Jesus to his churches in the Roman province of Asia. These churches face three different challenges. Smyrna and Philadelphia face *persecution*. Pergamum and Thyatira are being taught that it is acceptable to *compromise*. Ephesus and Sardis have succumbed to *complacency*, losing their passion, even their life. Jesus writes to comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable. Each message addresses conditions particular to that church, but each message is also to be heeded by all the churches, for the one with an ear is to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. We, likewise, are to heed these messages, for they are relevant to the Church in every generation.

The message to the church in Laodicea is the best known of the seven for it contains well-known imagery: the church is lukewarm, neither hot nor cold; Jesus threatens to spew the church out of his mouth; he stands at the door and knocks. Unfortunately these familiar images have been subject to much misinterpretation. There are no afflicted people in Laodicea for Jesus to comfort. Quite the opposite: Laodicea is full of comfortable people whom Jesus afflicts with a stinging rebuke. I find this message all too relevant to us today for we live in a society that wants to be comfortable at all costs, and the values of our culture have penetrated deeply into the Church.

A. The Message to the Church in Laodicea

Hear the word of the Lord Jesus Christ to the church in Laodicea:

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. 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.

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

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. (Rev 3:14-22 NIV)

1. Laodicea

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: (3:14a)

Laodicea lay 100 miles east of Ephesus, beside the Lycus River, a tributary of the Maeander. It was on a major crossroads between the road heading east from Ephesus, and the road heading south to the

coast from Sardis and Pergamum. Today it is an unexcavated ruin, but at the end of the first century, Laodicea was one of the wealthiest cities in Asia. Its wealth and renown were based on three industries in particular: it was an important banking center; it was a medical center specializing in eye salve; and it was a textile center, specializing in luxury garments made with its distinctive native black wool.

In AD 60, Laodicea was devastated by an earthquake. But whereas Sardis and Philadelphia gladly accepted the aid offered by the Roman emperor after their devastating earthquake in AD 17, Laodicea insisted on rebuilding its own way, using its own resources. The first-century Roman historian, Tacitus, writes, "In the Asian province one of its famous cities, Laodicea, was destroyed by an earthquake in this year, and rebuilt from its own resources without any subvention from Rome."¹ Such limited archaeology as has been done on Laodicea confirms this picture of a city proud of its own resources. Archaeologists have discovered numerous stones from monuments and buildings inscribed with the Greek phrase *ek tōn idiōn*, "of his own," i.e. the building was erected using the benefactor's own resources.

The New Testament mentions two other cities in this Lycus Valley. Colossae lay 10 miles upstream, where a cool, fresh mountain stream entered the Lycus. Hierapolis lay six miles away, directly east across the valley. Clearly visible from Laodicea is a broad white scar. Up close it can be seen that this is a white cliff, 300 feet high and about one mile wide. Today this is known as Pamukkale, Turkish for "cotton castle." This remarkable phenomenon is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Atop the cliff are hot springs, rich in calcareous minerals. As the water pours over the cliff, its minerals are deposited as dramatic white formations. The Romans were as impressed with this site as is UNESCO today. Around the hot springs on top of the cliff, they built Hierapolis.

In each of these three cities was a church. Probably these three churches had been established by Epaphras when Paul was at Ephesus. We know for sure that Epaphras established the church in Colossae, for Paul writes to that church,

You learned it [the gospel] from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. (Col 1:7-8)

And we know that Epaphras was at work also in the other two cities, for Paul adds at the end of his letter,

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis. Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings. Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea. (Col 4:12-16)

In the early 60s there were vibrant churches in these three cities. But as we'll soon see, just thirty years later the church in Laodicea was not doing well.

2. Self-description of Jesus

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. (3:14b)

As usual, Jesus commences his message to his church in Laodicea by directing her gaze onto himself. He introduces himself using three terms. Unlike the other six messages this self-description is not drawn from John's initial vision of Jesus (1:12-16), but it is fully consistent with the imagery of the whole book. Jesus is the Amen, language drawn from Isaiah 65:16 where God is twice called the God of Amen, the God of truth or the true God. Amen is a Hebrew word, an adverb that means "may it be so." In every instance other than Isaiah 65:16, it is used as a response to something just said, expressing the commitment of the speaker to what he has just heard. This usage is picked up in the New Testament, and continued on in the Church until today. When we say Amen at the end of a prayer, we are committing ourselves to that prayer, longing that it be so, that it be fulfilled.

Once in each testament the word Amen is used in a highly distinctive way. In Isaiah God says "Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth [Amen]; he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth [Amen]" (Isa 65:16). The context is God's promise to restore his people. Ultimately God's promises rest on his own character, for he is the Amen. Here in Revelation, Jesus describes himself as the Amen. As we've seen before, we have an ascription to Jesus of Old Testament titles reserved for God alone. Their attribution to anyone other than God would be blasphemous. Again we have this extraordinarily high Christology, this exalted understanding of the identity of Jesus. God is the Amen, and now Jesus is the Amen. Paul writes, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God" (2 Cor 1:20). In the name of Jesus Christ we add Amen to our petitions. But the important Amen is the one God has spoken to us, Jesus himself.

John has been instructed to write what he has seen, namely what is now and what will be (1:19). In the world of the "now" there is a contrast between the seen and the unseen. The visible world is largely counterfeit: the beast occupies a counterfeit throne, and receives the worship of the inhabitants of the world, the citizens of Babylon. There is open hostility to God and to his people. But John is given a revelation of the unseen world, where he sees the true throne, occupied by God and the Lamb, receiving the worship of his people. "What will be" is that the imposters will be exposed, the counterfeit will be overthrown. Once they are then the unseen can become seen, as the New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth. We long for that day to come, and at the end of the book we cry out, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (22:21). How can we know that this transition from the "what is" to the "what will be" will happen? It will happen because Jesus himself is the Amen. The "may it be so" is not just our wishful thinking, but is the declaration of God in Christ. Jesus is God's Amen that makes it happen.

The second term Jesus uses of himself is "the faithful and true witness." John has already described Jesus as the faithful witness (1:5). Faithful witness is a key concept in this book. In this world the saints are called to bear faithful witness to Jesus. Their model is Jesus, the archetypal faithful witness. It means bearing testimony to the true,

which in the world of the "what is now" is unseen to those without a revelation.

Thirdly, Jesus describes himself as "the ruler of God's creation." If you compare translations you will notice that the translators have had some difficulty with this phrase. The word *archē* signifies priority, whether in time or position or cause. Does it mean that Jesus has priority of position over creation, that he is its ruler? Or that he has priority in time, that he was before creation, as we read in John's Gospel, "*In the beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God *in the beginning*" (John 1:1-2)? Or that he has priority of cause, that he is the First Cause of all creation? Theologians have puzzled long and hard over the relationship between the Father and the Son, and over the relationship between the Son and creation. It is surely significant that the other passage that sheds most light on this phrase is in the letter which Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, just ten miles away. Paul describes Jesus Christ this way,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Col 1:15-20)

It seems more than likely that Rev 3:14 is a deliberate reference back to Paul's letter to Colossae. The Colossian believers had a faulty Christology. They had fallen prey to Gnosticism, one of whose tenets was to impose a chain of intermediaries between God and Christ. The Laodiceans also have a faulty Christology, though of a different type, as we'll see in a moment. Both needed to restore Jesus to the beginning of their thinking, to give him the preeminence. At the end of Revelation God describes himself as "the Beginning and the End" (21:6), and Jesus echoes (22:13). Indeed, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End (22:13). In whatever sense we understand Jesus' priority in this verse, it is clear that Jesus is reminding the Laodicean church of his exalted preeminence. In each of the three terms, Jesus places himself center-stage before the church. We will soon see why he does so.

3. Prophetic Message

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. (3:15-17)

As to the other churches, Jesus begins his prophetic message to his church in Laodicea with a statement of his knowledge of affairs in the church. In the other six churches, Jesus finds at least something good to commend, but in the Laodicean church he finds nothing worthy. Jesus accuses the church of being lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. Many sermons interpret the hot as zeal for Jesus and the cold as antagonism to him. But Jesus seems to consider hot and cold as equally satisfactory conditions. Here it helps to understand the local geography. Across the valley, Hierapolis had its hot mineral springs, which people then and now considered of medicinal value. Upriver

lay Colossae, with its cold, fresh water. In between lay Laodicea with no useful water of its own. Indeed it had to import water by aqueduct from a mineral spring. By the time the water reached Laodicea it would have been lukewarm and probably rather emetic. The first problem of the Laodicean church was that it was useless, good for nothing. The church neither healed nor refreshed.

Jesus has a second criticism. The city boasted of its wealth and refused Roman aid in rebuilding from the earthquake of AD 60. The church has a similar boast, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." The city did not need Rome, although it owed its prosperity to the peace that Rome had brought to Asia. The church does not need Jesus. Yet the church is the church of Jesus Christ. As we have repeatedly sung over the past few months, the Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. No doubt there was plenty of activity in the Laodicean church, but the church had lost its focus. The church in Ephesus had forsaken her first love (2:4). The church in Sardis was worse: though she had a reputation of being alive, she was dead (3:1). The church in Laodicea is still worse: she has forgotten the Lord completely. It is the antithesis of the Smyrnan church. That church thought she was poor, but Jesus says she is rich (2:9). This church thinks she is rich, but Jesus says she is poor. Indeed, the church is in such poor shape that Jesus piles up five adjectives to describe it: wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, naked.

What will Jesus do with such a church, a church that is so sick it makes him want to spew it out of his mouth? His resolve is a mixture of invitation and command:

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. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 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. (3:18-20)

There is still time. Jesus has not given up on the church in Laodicea. Since Laodicea was a prosperous commercial center, Jesus uses a commercial metaphor to urge repentance, counseling the church to buy from him three things that would be familiar to every resident: gold, woolen garments, and eye salve. By doing so she will redress her condition of being poor, blind and naked. The treasures that the world affords her are transitory and cannot meet her deepest needs. She needs spiritual riches that have been refined in the crucible of patient endurance. She needs spiritual garments, washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, so that she gain admission to the marriage supper of the Lamb. She needs spiritual sight so that she can see the unseen as well as the seen, so that she can distinguish the true from the counterfeit. Jesus bids her come to him to buy for that is commercial language she understands, but in reality we cannot buy anything from him. He knows that we have no money, yet still bids us come. In the closing verses of the book we find a wonderful invitation:

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (22:17)

This invitation is based on one issued by God through his prophet Isaiah to his people,

**Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk**

without money and without cost. (Isa 55:1)

Each invitation is addressed not to those who are rich but to those who are poor. The tragedy of the Laodicean church is that she thinks she can make it on her own, using her own resources. To quote Frank Sinatra, "I did it my way." The city did it her own way, proudly chiseling *ek tōn idiōn* "of her own" onto her monuments. The church is doing the same thing, but by so doing she is shutting out Jesus.

Jesus' stinging rebuke of the church is evidence not of his rejection of the church, but of his great love for the church, for it is those he loves that he rebukes and disciplines. It is his church, not the Laodicean's church. His rebuke is for the purpose that the church might repent and once again be zealous for him. It is because he loves his church that he appeals to the church to let him back inside.

Verse 20 is one of the most famous verses of the Bible, a verse that has been used repeatedly for evangelistic purposes. It is assumed that the verse is written to unbelievers, but notice that the verse is addressed to the church, the church which has shut Jesus out. Holman Hunt's famous painting *The Light of the World*, portrays a weak Jesus standing forlornly outside a door with no handle on the outside. It would be better to envision Jesus hammering loudly and persistently at the door of the church, seeking to awaken the church from its self-sufficient complacency. If they will let him back in to his rightful place as head of the church, there will be restoration. If not, the implication is judgment. The opportunity for Jesus' gracious restoration is expressed in the metaphor of a meal, a powerful symbol of hospitality, friendship and reconciliation.

4. Promise to the Victor

As with the other letters, Jesus closes his message to the church in Laodicea with a promise to the victor, to the one who overcomes.

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. (3:21)

The victor in Laodicea is the one who does not shut Jesus out, the one who knows his need for Jesus and welcomes him. To this one Jesus promises a place on his throne. Jesus will deal with the overcomer the same way that his Father dealt with him, the archetypal overcomer. Because Jesus was the faithful witness, the Father vindicated him. Because the overcomer is a faithful witness, Jesus will vindicate him. Here, as elsewhere in the book, the believer is called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

B. Poor and Needy

The Laodicean church receives the harshest criticism of any church because she has shut out Jesus, the Lord of the Church. The complacency that had already infected Ephesus and Sardis had reached its logical end in Laodicea. The church had forgotten that she is the church of Jesus Christ, had forgotten that it is all about Jesus. We are poor and needy people desperately in need of Jesus, both for salvation and for ongoing spiritual life.

1. Poor and Needy for Salvation

We are poor and needy when it comes to salvation. The scandal of the gospel is that it is the poor and needy who receive salvation. Throughout the gospels we find addressed to Jesus the cry *kyrie eleison*, "Lord, have mercy." It is on the lips of lepers, the blind, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the father of the epileptic boy. But it is never on the lips of the religious leaders. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus tells the parable of a Pharisee and a tax collector, each of whom prayed to God. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like all

other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.” The tax collector prayed, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Each received what he asked for. The Pharisee asked for nothing and received nothing. The tax collector asked for mercy and received salvation.

In their quest to be contemporary and seeker-sensitive, many churches have abandoned talk of sin and repentance. But they do seekers a great disservice. The best thing we can do for the seeker is to introduce him to the cry, “Lord have mercy upon me,” and to the Savior who hears such a cry. It is the poor and needy that Jesus invites to himself. This is why I included certain hymns in our service. First, the hymn by Horatius Bonar,

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
 “Come unto Me and rest;
 Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
 Thy head upon My breast.”
 I came to Jesus as I was,
 Weary, and worn, and sad;
 I found in Him a resting-place,
 And He has made me glad.
 Then the hymn by Joseph Hart,
 Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
 Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
 Jesus ready stands to save you,
 Full of pity, love and power.
 All the fitness he requireth
 Is to feel your need of him...
 ...If you tarry till you're better,
 You will never come at all.

It is no disgrace to admit that we are needy. Quite the opposite: until you admit you are needy there is no hope of salvation. If you are laboring under the impression that you need to clean up your act first before you can find mercy from God, you are mistaken. It is “the last, the lost, the least...and the dead”² that Jesus welcomes. Come to him and find mercy.

2. Poor and Needy for Daily Life

Our state of being poor and needy does not end when we find salvation in Christ. The Church must beware lest she cease to cry for mercy. For centuries this cry for mercy has been integrated into the very liturgy of the Church, in either sung or spoken form. In its sung form, there are many beautiful settings of the cry, “Lord, have mercy,” in either its Greek form, *Kyrie eleison*, or its Latin form, *Miserere*. In its spoken form, a liturgy typically includes confession of sin, the call “Lord, have mercy upon us,” and the pronouncement of absolution upon those who truly repent and believe.

The contemporary Church, in her rejection of liturgy, her desire to be seeker-sensitive, and her use of contemporary praise choruses, has thrown out this cry for mercy. This is to the great detriment of the believer, as well as to the seeker.

Our responsive reading from Psalm 86 began, “Hear, O Lord, and answer, for I am poor and needy.” This was a cry addressed to God by one of his people, David, who recognized the need for God’s ongoing mercy in his life. These two terms, poor (*ʾānī*) and needy (*ʿebyōn*), originally meant those who were literally in that physical state. But the terms acquired a spiritual meaning, signifying those

who were aware of their spiritual need and therefore were longing for God’s salvation. “The poor” (Heb. *ʾanawim*) became a term for those hungering for God. Luke introduces us to two such people: Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was “waiting for the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25) and Anna, who spoke to those who were “looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). Because both were longing for God they were able to recognize Jesus as the answer to their dreams, as God’s Amen to his promises. These are the sort of people to whom Jesus refers in his first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3).

The thing that I fear most is not that I face suffering or persecution, but that my heart grow cold, that I forget that I am poor and needy. The moment I start thinking that I can do it on my own, out of my own resources, I atrophy. Unlike Sinatra, I never want to say, “I did it my way.” Preachers are fond of identifying this generation with the Laodicean church. But this final message is a strong warning to the believer in every age. It is a warning to all of us here, to beware of ever thinking ourselves strong and in need of nothing. We are desperately in need of Jesus and his ongoing mercy.

To those who welcome Jesus he promises to sup with them. Therefore let us come to the communion table. The meal served at this table is simple in its elements, but rich in its symbolism. We eat the bread and drink the cup to remember that we are saved through the body and blood of Jesus, not through any of our own doing. We eat and drink together in communion because we are together the body of Christ, part of the Church of which Christ is the Head. And we eat and drink in the presence of God for this is a fellowship meal with him, a meal of friendship signifying reconciliation. We eat and drink because we were poor and needy and God in Christ showed us mercy. We eat and drink because we continue to be poor and needy, and in need of an infusion of God’s grace. Quite how that grace is conveyed through this meal is a mystery, but Christ bids us come and receive grace. Quite how Christ is present is also a mystery, but he is here and he bids us come to sup with him.

But before we come to the table, let us sing. Last week we sang, *Round the Throne in Radiant Glory*, a hymn written just three years ago by the late James Boice, long-time minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia. In the last year of his life he wrote a dozen hymns, for which the director of music at Tenth Presbyterian composed tunes. This week we’ll sing another of Boice’s new hymns. Based upon Revelation 22 it is an invitation to “Come to the waters, whoever is thirsty...Jesus, the Living One offers you mercy.”

O Lord, have mercy upon us, and grant us thy salvation.

[Now may you] grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and for ever! Amen. (2 Pet 3:18)

1. Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome* (trans. Michael Grant; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1956), 14.27.

2. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 122.