

Revelation 3:17-19

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Jesus now explains what it means to be lukewarm and believe you are self-sufficient. He advises that this church in Laodicea depend on Him for what they need instead.

Having just said that He will spit out the church in Laodicea due to their lukewarm nature (Revelation 3:16), Jesus now explains what it means to be lukewarm:

Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.

The believers in Laodicea think they are self-sufficient and already have everything they need. Because of their material wealth, they do not see their spiritual need. They do not realize that even if they have what they need physically, they are still spiritually poor.

What is inferred is that this condition of physical comfort has caused them to be content with worldly reward, so they see no need to put themselves at risk by seeking the things of God. They are, therefore, “lukewarm”—their comfort in the world has left them of no use for Jesus’s spiritual kingdom.

These believers are seeking the wrong kind of riches. They are storing up earthly riches that do not last, worldly pleasures that do not satisfy, and forsaking the opportunity to gain spiritual riches and spiritual fulfillment that will last forever (Matthew 6:19-20). They are living the illusion that their physical wealth is permanent, when physically, nothing is promised to us. Even if we have all our material needs met one day, they could all be gone the next.

And when we die, we leave everything physical behind. But we take everything spiritual with us to the next life. Therefore we should focus on clothing and riches that we can take with us, spiritual riches that last. We do this by listening to and relying on Jesus.

It is always in our actual best interest to rely on Jesus to supply our needs instead of relying on ourselves (Matthew 6:33). It is in realizing our need for Him that we can build greater dependence upon Him, and walk in His ways. As we set aside self (the way of the world) and depend on Jesus (the way of God), we are following the example of Jesus, who did nothing apart from the direction of His Father (John 5:30).

When we follow this example of obedience, we are useful to God. We are fit for His service. We can avoid being of the world (1 John 2:15). We can avoid being lukewarm, and instead be useful in Jesus’s kingdom.

The church in Laodicea is thinking that they have enough earthly *gold* that makes them say “*I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.*” As a result of this perspective which focuses on earthly status and comfort, they do not realize their true spiritual condition.

Jesus tells them their current reality is actually that they are *wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked*.

These believers have a perspective that they are *rich* and *wealthy* but the truth is that they are *wretched* and *miserable*. The Greek word translated *miserable* can also be rendered “pitiable.” The Laodiceans perceive themselves to be in an enviable position, living in prestige, and in the comfort of their earthly abundance. But they do not see that they are in spiritual poverty, which means that in truth they are not to be envied, but pitied. They are squandering their opportunity to gain true riches, and real status. Jesus wants them to have their desires for riches and status, but advises them to see things with the eyes of spiritual reality.

The spiritual reality is that the believers in Laodicea are in a *wretched* or afflicted state. This means that the physical comfort they are living is an illusion. This might be manifested as having physical comfort but spiritual turmoil. In the modern age, we might say “mental health issues.”

If they want to be truly *rich*, they have a need for heavenly *gold*. Therefore, in order to solve their problem of self-sufficiency and their improper view of reality, Jesus says: *I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.*

The Laodicean believers have a vision problem; they are not seeing reality as it is. They need spiritual eyes to see the reality that spans beyond the mere physical world. They need *eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see*. Laodicea was a city known for producing *eye salve*, so this is a very specific example to them of something that they believe they already have on their own. But again, Jesus wants them to see with spiritual eyes. They need to know Him intimately in order to gain true riches. They need to depend on Jesus, not material wealth, to fill their deepest needs.

The church in Laodicea needs to see that they do not need earthly *gold* in order to be truly *rich*, but *gold* from God that has been *refined by fire*. As we see in verse 20, the way to gain all the *gold* we want is to listen to Jesus, learn from Him, and follow Him (Revelation 3:20). The greatest treasure we can gain is wisdom (Proverbs 16:16). Materialism says happiness lies in gaining “more.” But by definition, we can never gain “more.” Once we gain the thing we desired, it is no longer part of “more.” Wisdom allows us to be content with what we have, while still striving for a great cause.

Jesus says *I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire*. By saying *advise*, Jesus makes clear that it is up to the decision of the Laodicean believers what they will do. God has given agency to humans to make choices as to the actions they take. Even though God is almighty, and could impose Himself upon us, He has chosen to give humans the power of choice.

The ability to make moral choices is a key way humans are made in His image (Genesis 1:26). This is why Jesus says *I advise*. It would certainly seem to be wise to take the advice of the one who was the agent of all creation (Colossians 1:16-17). Wisdom is also something that must be chosen, and pursued.

We gain *gold* from Jesus when we hear the voice of Jesus, and heed His words (Revelation 3:20). Listening to and following Jesus's advice is the way to gain true riches and true status. It is a wealth that transcends the physical world.

This is the way to our greatest blessing (Revelation 1:3). This basic idea that true wealth is purchased spiritually rather than materially is also repeated in Isaiah:

“Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
And your wages for what does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
And delight yourself in abundance.
Incline your ear and come to Me.
Listen, that you may live.”
(Isaiah 55:2-3a)

The key phrase in this passage from Isaiah is “Listen carefully to Me.” Listening to and following God is the way to gain true abundance. It is the way to life, peace and “delight.”

Trusting in the riches of this world leads to misery and loss. If we trust in earthly riches, we are trusting in something that will inevitably end (Luke 12:20-21). Ultimately, everything material we possess will end up in someone else's hands. But if we trust in God, we gain riches that last forever (Luke 12:33). Jesus advises us to *buy from Him gold refined by fire so that we may become rich*. Jesus desires His people to have true riches that will last forever. Jesus advises His people to pursue true wealth, a wealth that will endure eternally.

An offer of an unlimited supply of *gold* that makes us incredibly *rich* is an amazing deal. However the *gold* that represents true riches is gold that is *refined by fire*. This likely refers to the *fire* of trials.

The great riches of wisdom comes through lived experience, and lived experience occurs through trials/difficulties. James tells us to be joyful when we encounter trials because a tested faith endures, and that has great value (James 1:2-3). An enduring faith is that of a faithful witness like that of Jesus, the faithful witness (Revelation 3:14). It is the enduring faith of a faithful witness that gains the reward of a “crown of life” (James 1:12). It is the enduring faith of a faithful witness that causes us to be one who “overcomes” even as Jesus overcame (Revelation 3:21).

The *gold* we can purchase (all we want) through listening to God is *refined by fire*. The Bible calls God a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24; Hebrews 12:29). It seems that when the fire of God's judgment engages with the deeds of His people, it becomes a *refining fire*. It consumes unrighteousness, and leaves behind what is righteous. The Apostle Paul uses this picture to depict how the deeds of believers will be judged by Christ, saying that His judgement fire will burn away “wood, hay, straw” and leave behind “gold, silver, precious stones” (1 Corinthians 3:12).

The next thing that Jesus says to *advise you to buy from Me* is *white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed*. To be clothed in *white garments* was promised in the letter to the church in Sardis to those who overcome (Revelation 3:5). *White garments* may be associated with authority and rank. So the *white garments* might be indicative of one who overcomes, as Jesus overcame. It will be the overcomers that will share Jesus's authority (Revelation 3:21). It seems that the alternative to having a white garment is to have the *shame of nakedness*.

This might indicate that righteous deeds will be like fine clothing. The *white garments* might represent a way Jesus will use to honor those who were faithful witnesses for Him on earth. The alternative is *nakedness* and *shame*. Those who show up in heaven without righteous deeds to show for their time on earth will be like someone who shows up to a banquet with no clothes. They will be ashamed. The *white garments* will set apart believers who were faithful servants, faithful witnesses.

God is pictured in the Old Testament as being like both a "refiner's fire" as well as a "fuller's soap" (Malachi 3:2). Just as a refiner needs fire to cleanse impurities from ore, and refine it into pure gold, a fuller, or launderer, needs soap as an agent to cleanse a garment. The refined gold we purchase from Jesus will be gained through experiences of exercising faith in difficulty, following His word through the trials of life.

In the case of the Laodiceans, the trial is one of overcoming earthly comfort. The same is the case for the recommended "purchase" of *white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed*. The *white garments* become *white* through the cleansing of the "fuller's soap" from God's washing of impurities from our lives.

Ephesians says something similar to this idea of God washing us clean from sin in order to prepare us to gain great rewards:

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless."
(Ephesians 5:25-27)

In this passage from Ephesians, Jesus uses the imagery of His servants (believers) as His bride. The way Jesus loves His bride sacrificially is by cleansing her with the "washing of water with the word." His goal is to "present to Himself the church (all believers) in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle..." All believers are destined to be conformed to Jesus's image (Romans 8:29). The question is "At what point will we be purified with refiner's fire and fuller's soap?" If we do this in this life, through seeing with spiritual reality, through listening to Jesus, then we will gain the great reward of the overcomer (Revelation 3:21).

This section of advice is closed with an explanation of Jesus' *discipline* philosophy: *Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent*.

As God's children, He lovingly exercises *discipline* on us just as a parent disciplines their children (1 John 3:2). He wants us to grow in wisdom and maturity, therefore He will accordingly correct us when we stray from seeking what is good. Jesus has spoken quite plainly to the believers in Laodicea. The fact that Jesus says *Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline* makes clear that His direct and unflattering words are intended for His children. Jesus is not trying to get them to like Him—that would be self-seeking. Rather Jesus is telling them the truth, that they might gain great benefit. It will be up to the Laodiceans whether or not they will listen, and *repent*.

To *repent* means to alter your perspective and take a new direction. Jesus is trying to get the believers in Laodicea to see wealth and status through spiritual eyes rather than physical eyes. In doing so, Jesus attempts to lead them to their real self-interest. This is similar to the Apostle Paul's admonition to be transformed into the image of Jesus by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1-2). God wants to get us to set aside the worldly perspective that is false and leads to death. He wants us to *repent*, to change our mind from false to true, and see reality as it is.

Jesus does not want a tepid response. Jesus wants the Laodiceans to be *zealous*. The idea behind the Greek word translated *zealous* is to have a deep desire to strive for something. It's a passion to seek a particular outcome. Jesus wants the Laodiceans to see the true opportunity before them, and "go for it with all their might." If we see the opportunity truly, it should drive us to exercise all diligence to accomplish it.

Our response to Jesus' correction should be to *be zealous and repent*. We should happily accept Jesus' correction and zealously seek His ways. We should trust that present trials will produce endurance in the long run (James 1:2-4). And we should trust that Jesus's rewards are worth leaving behind everything, and pursuing with all our being, as we shall see in the next section of the letter to Laodicea.

Biblical Text

¹⁷ Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, ¹⁸ I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹ Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.