

AVOIDING SPIRITUAL PITFALLS

LESSONS FROM THE SEVEN LETTERS IN REVELATION

SESSION SIX: SARDIS & LAODICEA - THE PITFALL DECEPTION OF SELF-DECEPTION

Abraham Lincoln is right; "You can fool all the people some of the time, and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." To that, may I add, "But you can fool yourself to all the people all the time."

The greatest deception men suffer is from their own opinions.
Leonardo da Vinci

"I don't believe there's any cloud that hangs over me. I think there's nothing but sunshine hanging over me."
Rod Blagojevich, Former Chicago Governor

"It was like riding a tiger, not knowing how to get off without being eaten. I realized that having tasted the good life, I cannot stand the ordinary life."
Ramalinga Raju, Former Founder/Chairman of Satyam Computer Services

"The world is enough for every man's need, but will never be enough for every man's greed."
Mahatma Gandhi

To the Church in Sardis

1"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. **2**Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. **3**Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. **4**Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. **5**He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. **6**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

The letters to the Seven Churches follow this pattern.

The Centrality of Christ

The Affirmation

The Fault Line

The Exhortation

The Promise

INTRODUCTION: SARDIS

1. THE CITY

Sardis, 80 km East of Smyrna, was once a mighty city on top of a 1500-foot mountain with a great view of the plain below. It was the capital of the kingdom of Lydia, which ruled Asia Minor from 700 – 546 BC. It was conquered by Cyrus in 54 BC and made the western terminus of his imperial highway from Susa. The city's wealth and historical importance were due to its central location and fertility of the region. However, its' glory days were over by the time of Revelation, although it was a thriving commercial city. The city was rebuilt under Emperor Tiberius after an earthquake devastated it in 17 AD.

Sardis was full of sophisticated paganism. The Greeks had identified the early Asiatic mother goddess with Demeter. Romans had associated this goddess with the deified empress Livia. It was also the center for the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis and the Phrygian Cybele.

There was no persecution of the church, which reflected the acceptance of Jews and Christians by the community, even though they rejected pagan worshipⁱ. Archaeological findings indicate a huge Jewish population at Sardis. The Jewish community was apparently significant and powerful. They had built a synagogue near the city gymnasium (a center of pagan Greek culture). The synagogue was roughly the length of a soccer field, certainly very large at that time.

Both cities, Sardis and Laodicea (3: 14-19) were two of the seven churches noted as still-uninhabited ruins by W.M. Ramsay. E. M. Blaiklock called Sardis, 'the city that died'.ⁱⁱ

2. The Church

Jesus' followers have co-existed peacefully with the community of the synagogue and very well in harmony with the city establishment. Lacking the world's opposition, they may have grown comfortable in their relationship with the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

"The blood of the martyr is the seed of growth in the church but the comfort of the church is the seed of death in it." Jesus' reproof is that the church has a reputation of being alive but is actually dead.

A. OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION

1. THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

1"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

Christ is referred to as the One who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars (v 1). He controls the leaders of the church.

2. THE AFFIRMATION

4Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

The word 'soiled' or 'stained' is used elsewhere in connection with idolatrous involvement (Rev 14: 4). Only a few have not been 'soiled'. Others are stained by their little compromises arising from their desire to keep a low profile and not standing out for Christ within their culture. Their timidity is perhaps manifested in their failure to bear witness.

3. THE FAULT LINE

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

Christ's devastating comment of the Church is brief but potent: You have a reputation of being alive but you are dead. The church is completely self-deceived. The church herself, and even all the regional churches, think that she is alive, but in actuality she is dead.

As Keener summarizes, "All regard her as a flourishing, active, successful church – all except Christ!"^{iv} Sardis was not what the world would call a dead church.

Local Christians still held memories of images of life and death. Sardis was known as a great city from the time of its most famous ruler, Croesus but by the time Revelation was written, it had faded in prominence. Several decades before that, it was devastated by an earthquake and there was a constant fear of another one.

So, Jesus' admonition that 'you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead' resonates with the Christians. This is, of course, in contrast to Christ, 'who was dead and is now alive.

4. THE EXHORTATION

2Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.3Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

How do we prevent self-deception?

1. Wake up – be shaken from our sleep and stupor.

Jesus Christ's clarion call was to 'wake up', implying that the church was sleeping. Become more self-aware.

2. Strengthen what remains – Focus on what is truly alive in the church and start from the beginning again.

Search deep down and find that which is truly alive. The word 'complete' does not mean perfection but rather that the church did not measure up to Christ's standard. The Ephesian Church had it all except love. The Thyatira Church was applauded for their works, love, faith, service, patient endurance, and their progression in faith, but their compromise with immorality and corruption derailed them.

In other words, we must keep making Christ central in all aspects of our life.

3. Remember what we have received and heard – Go back to the fundamentals

The call to remember is a call that God issues throughout history. We tend to forget what God has done and how we received His message. Christ initiated the spiritual movement in our lives and His grace started it all. We are to remember that!

4. Obey – Practice the fundamental.

Obedience is an essential part of the recovery. We cannot stop at hearing but we have to do and practice the fundamental.

5. Repent – Turn back to God continuously.

The call of repentance is the call to obey what we have received and heard. Obedience is the essence of repentance. We cannot continue to be and do the same (See discussion on Repentance in Session 5: Thyatira – Pitfall of Economic Corruption).

This coming “like a thief” is different from the Second Coming of Christ, the final eschatological coming. Here it refers to His surprise visit into our lives and the possible judgment that will come. When that happens, it will be sudden. This suddenness is a premonition of the final consummation of the Second Coming of Christ.

5. THE PROMISE

5He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. **6**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To be ‘dressed in white’ is symbolic of purity, resulting from fidelity in persecution and staying true to the faith. Jesus Christ Himself is the ‘worthy’ lamb who was slain (5: 9, 12) and so are all those who have suffered for their faith (cf 6: 9-11; 7: 9, 14). In the Gospels, those who acknowledged Christ in the face of persecution were called worthy.

The purification that comes with end-time tribulation is a fulfillment of Daniel’s prophecy concerning the saints who will be ‘made white’ through persecution (Dan 11: 35; 12: 1). That Daniel 11-12 stands as the background to 3: 4-5 is confirmed by the reference to the book of life (Rev 5; Dan 12: 1).

‘White’ also signifies victory and celebration. When triumphant Roman generals march in procession with their armies into the city, the people would greet the parade and celebrate the victory dressed in white. Hence, those who are dressed in white will celebrate the triumph of Christ.

To the Church in Laodicea

¹⁴"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. ¹⁵I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷You 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. ¹⁸I 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. ¹⁹Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. ²⁰Here 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. ²¹To 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. ²²He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

B. INTRODUCTION: LAODICEA

1. THE CITY

Laodicea (modern day Eski-hisar) was situated at the junction of two important trade routes in the Lycus River valley, flanked by two of its tributaries and protected by the Salbacus and Cadmus mountains.^v

Laodicea, the ancient town of Diospolis ('city of Zeus') was fortified as a Seleucid outpost by Antichus II (ca 250 BC) and renamed for his wife, Laodice.^{vi} It was a most prosperous and wealthy city from 133BC, during the Roman Empire. They reconstructed the ancient roads leading to the Anatolian hinterland and Laodicea became the major junction for the traffic west to Ephesus and the Aegean, north and west to Philadelphia, Pergamum, and Smyrna, east through southern Galatia to the Cilician Gates and south to the Mediterranean.^{vii}

Among the distinguished ruins are a large stadium, a gymnasium, two theatres, gates and several churches. Also, there are the remains of a great water system. Its fine aqueduct is built from large tightly fitted and cemented rectangular stones, through which a circular central channel is bored. The water was transported from the mountain springs and raised to a tall water-distribution tower by siphon action.^{viii} We have reference to this when the church is described as neither 'hot nor cold' (3: 16).

It derived its wealth from its (a) banking establishments, (b) textile industry and (c) medical school. Along with the cities of Hierapolis and Colossae (cf Col 4: 13), Laodicea was famous for its woolen trade from the breeding of black sheep. These wool were made into woolen overcoats. This might have given rise to the reference to 'white garments' in Rev 3: 18.

There was a famous medical school in Laodicea. "Phrygian powder" grounded in Laodicea was one of its medicinal concoction to treat diseases of the eyes. However, the eye salve as mentioned in Rev 3: 18 is a historically appropriate symbol for Laodicea.^{ix}

2. The Church

Paul or one of his followers probably brought Christianity to the region (Col 4: 12) during his third missionary journey in Ephesus.

C. OBSERVATION & INTERPRETATION

1. THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

This expression has its roots in Isa 65: 15, 16 where God is described as the 'God of truth' (literally, God of Amen). Rev 3: 14 and Isa 65: 16 are the only two places that Amen is used as a name. The word 'Amen' itself is the Semitic equivalence of 'faithful' and 'true'. Hence, Christ is identified as someone who is firm, true and faithful.

Christ is described as 'the ruler of God's creation'. 'Ruler' could mean first in rank or first in time and or both. 'Origin' (John 1: 1, 1 John 1: 1) may refer to a similar phrase in Col 1: 15, 16 where Christ is presented as 'the firstborn of all creation'.

This stood in contrast to later Gnostic teaching that believed in the worship of intermediary angels organized in the form of a hierarchy between God and the world, within which Christ was regarded as simply one such intermediary.

The assertion of 'ruler' safeguards this truth and emphasizes the uniqueness and authority of Christ.

2. THE AFFIRMATION

3. THE FAULT LINE

¹⁵*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!* ¹⁶*So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.* ¹⁷*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.*

The Lord's chastisement of the church is that they are neither cold nor hot. The contrast is between the fresh (cold) waters of Laodicea's spring on the one hand and the medicinally beneficial hot waters of Hierapolis. The church is ineffectual in bringing both freshness of life to the spiritually thirsty or bringing healing to the spiritually sick. It is lukewarm – useless in its effects. This demonstrates their failure to shine as light and bear witness as a church.

The Laodicean church was confident in their wealth. Laodicea had rebuilt their city after an earthquake in AD 60, without any financial help from Rome. They had their own resources. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote, "Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources and with no help from us."^x

Christ's perspective of the church, despite its own claim, was very penetrative: they did not realize that they were wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

4. THE EXHORTATION

¹⁸*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.* ¹⁹*Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent.*

²⁰*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.*

Words like 'gold', 'clothes' and 'salve' are what the Laodicean Christians can identify with because of their sources of wealth, such as the black wool they produce and famous medical school in treatment of eye diseases. Hence the three-fold indictment of 'poor, naked and blind' is appropriate in view of Laodicea's reputation as a banking center, its woolen industry, and its medical school famous for ophthalmology.

Christ's exhortation to the church was to:

- a. Buy from Him gold refined in the fire to be truly rich:

Gold refined in fire is a metaphor for purity attained through the removal of sin (Job 23: 10; Pro 27: 21). It is also used to describe the purification of Christians through suffering and tribulation (Zech 13: 9; 1 Pet 1: 6-9). The Laodicean Church had compromised their faith by going along with the world in their pursuit of wealth. But in reality, they were poor in the sight of God. It reminds us of the word in Scripture, "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt 10: 39).

- b. Wear clothes to cover their shameful nakedness

The donning of white clothes stands in contrast to the wearing of black woolen clothes, which the Laodiceans are known for. It denotes a refusal to be stained by idolatry.

In the Bible, the receiving of fine clothing was a sign of special honor (Joseph was honored by the father in Gen 37: 3 and by Pharaoh in Gen 41:42. Also the story of the Father honoring the prodigal son in Lk 15: 22). The Laodicean Christians were indicted for their idolatrous involvement.

- c. Salve their eyes so that they can see

Unfortunately, the Laodicean Church is blinded by her own sin. That is why they need the spiritual balm to salve their eyes so that they can see.

Christ reminded them that his rebuke and discipline was born out of love, not punishment. His purpose was redemption and recovery. So, the most appropriate response was to 'be earnest and repent'.

Repentance is a divine initiative. It involves a turning from sin and turning to Christ. To "stand at the door and knock" is an invitation to intimacy. In the Eastern custom, sharing a meal is an act of intimacy.

Despite the Laodicean Church's blindness and self-deception, Christ was knocking at their door, waiting for them to listen and open the door of their heart to Him. He wanted to go in and eat with them.

Christ's invitation has a nine-fold perspective.

1. The Savior is here – He is among messy Christians.
2. The Savior is standing – He is patiently waiting.
3. The Savior is knocking – He respects our freewill. He doesn't force His way into our life.
4. The Savior is inviting us personally (Notice the change in pronoun from 'those' (v 19) to 'anyone' and 'him' (v 20).
5. The Savior is inviting the one who will listen to His voice – Learning to listen to Christ's voice is an important part of the Christian life. We are in too much of a hurry that we often do not listen.
6. The Savior is inviting the one who will open the door – The courage and the will to open our hearts to Christ is the next step to recovery.

7. The Savior promises that He will come in – His invitation is unconditional. No matter how long, how far, and how deep we have gone astray, HE WILL COME IN!
8. The Savior promises ‘I will eat with him’ – Christ wants to have a most intimate relationship with us at the table of trust.
9. The Savior also promises ‘He with me’ – Christ wants complete synergy of life between Him and me both now and forever more. There is an eschatological aspect to this.

The best description of this invitation comes from the song, ‘The Savior is Waiting’.

The Savior Is Waiting

*The Savior is waiting to enter your heart
Why don't you let Him come in?
There's nothing in this world to keep you apart
What is your answer to Him?*

Chorus:

*Time after time
He has waited before
And now He is waiting again
To see if you are willing
To open the door
Oh, how He wants to come in.*

*If you'll take one step
Toward the Savior, my friend,
You'll find His arms open wide.
Receive Him, and all of your darkness will end
Within your heart He'll abide.*

6. THE PROMISE

²¹To 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. ²²He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches

All is not lost for the Laodicean Church. They still have a chance. Christ rebukes her because He loves her. His purpose of the strong rebuke is clear – LOVE.

And He promised that if they overcome, they will be given the authority to sit with Him, just as He did. Notice that even if the Church did not repent and overcome, the offer is opened to the individual, ‘To HIM who overcomes’. Christ is appealing to the individual.

The word ‘overcomes’ refers to the ability to get out of their own stupor of self-deception. The ‘throne’ signifies authority and power. Sitting with the Father’s throne illustrates the intimate relationship between God and Jesus Christ. The one who overcomes is promised the most ‘majestic reward of all, a seat at the divine banquet and a place on the throne of heaven’.^{xi}

This is a familiar promise for the future in Revelation (2: 26, 27; 5: 10; 20: 6; 22:5) as well as a common Jewish theme (Dan 7: 22; 1 En 108:12).^{xii}

D. DISCUSSION & APPLICATION

1. Reputation and reality are not the same. The Sardis has a 'good name', highly regarded by even the other churches. Unfortunately, Jesus' opinion is different. How is this possible in your life?
2. What is self-deception to you? How does self-deception work? Most importantly, what is one area in your life that you are most prone to self-deception?
3. The Savior is Waiting. Why do you take so long to open the door your life for Christ to come in? What keeps you from listening to Him and opening your door to Him?

ⁱ Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

ⁱⁱ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. General Editor, Geoffrey Bromiley. William B. Erdmann Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.1988.

ⁱⁱⁱ Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

^{iv} Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.

^v The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. General Editor, Geoffrey Bromiley. William B. Erdmann Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.1988.

^{vi} The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. General Editor, Geoffrey Bromiley. William B. Erdmann Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.1988.

^{vii} The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. General Editor, Geoffrey Bromiley. William B. Erdmann Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.1988.

^{viii} The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. General Editor, Geoffrey Bromiley. William B. Erdmann Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.1988.

^{ix} The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. General Editor, Geoffrey Bromiley. William B. Erdmann Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.1988.

^x Mounce, Revelation, p 107

^{xi} Michael Wilcock. The Message of Revelation. Editor: John R.W. Stott. The Bible Speaks Today.1975. Inter-Varsity Press. Downers Grove, Illinois, USA.

^{xii} Craig S. Keener. The NIV Application Commentary, Revelation. Zondervan. Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. 2000.