

Liberality And Legalism

Examples of Self-Worship

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When we hear the word Laodicean, we probably have a certain image that comes to mind. There are certain characteristics or attitudes that we classify as being Laodicean, such as complacency, self-sufficiency, distraction from spiritual things, self-righteousness, and perhaps spiritual blindness. The letter in Revelation 3 talks about being rich and increased with goods, and that wealth appears to be highlighted again in the description of Babylon in Revelation 18. And so dependence on wealth may be one of the things we often associate with Laodiceanism.

But today we are going to look around outside this box a little and perhaps challenge some of the boundaries of this stereotypical image on the common application of the letter to the Laodicean church. This letter contains what is probably the strongest divine warning that has been given to a group of people. But there is another group of people that likewise received very strong rebukes from Jesus Christ. The second group of people that Jesus raked over the coals, and with good reason, is, of course, the party of Jews known as the Pharisees.

We probably very rarely group the Laodiceans and the Pharisees together. We may not think that there is much in common between the affluent, pleasure-seeking, distracted, liberal Laodiceans and the strict, reclusive, legalistic Pharisees who are more interested in the finer points of law than in wine, women, and song. But we will see these groups are not so different.

My intent today is not to blur the lines between the Pharisees and the Laodiceans, but to help us to understand to a greater degree why Christ was so displeased with these groups of people that appear on surface to be so drastically different.

Jesus tells the Laodiceans in reference to their works that they are neither cold nor hot, that they are lukewarm. Thus, their works are not of any use to

Christ. Notice He does not say that they do not have any works, just that the works that they do have are not of any use to Him.

This condemnation also applies to the Pharisees. Notice Christ's words in Matthew 23, verse 2.

Matthew 23:2-7 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.'

Jesus Christ acknowledged that the Pharisees were in a position of responsibility, specifically to read the law to the people. But their works were an abomination to Him. Christ says in verse 3, not to follow their works, not to imitate them. And in verse 5, He explains why: "all of their works serve to glorify themselves before men." This is in direct contradiction of Matthew 5:16, which says that the purpose of our works should be to glorify God in heaven.

We know from other scriptures that the Pharisees kept the Sabbath and the holy days, and they tithed very carefully. They gave alms to the poor, gifts to the Temple. Many of them fasted at least once a week. They made prayer a regular part of their lives.

They even separated themselves from the culture at large. The word Pharisee means, "A separatist, or one who separates." These are things that we would normally consider to be good works, and even necessary.

But as far as the Pharisees were concerned, the problem was not that they ignored the law, but that they kept it for the wrong reason. Their intent was wrong. They made sure everyone else knew about their works. They were glorifying themselves rather than God.

As a result, these works were not helpful to anyone. These works did not liberate or set free as Christ's works did. They did not lift burdens but instead made the burdens on the people very grievous and heavy. The Pharisees were interested in keeping up their appearance of righteousness and were very concerned about how they were being perceived. They took a hard line on issues for the sake of being perceived as very zealous, and righteous, and upright.

But there were gaping holes in other areas of their application of the law. All of their works were overshadowed by their own self-worship and self-interest. And like Christ says of the Laodiceans, these works are not good for anything at all. Not only are they useless, but they are actually damaging to other people.

You see, the Pharisees were in a position to influence the common people's view and impression of God. As a spiritual authority of sorts, they are supposed to speak for God. But their actions were speaking far louder than their words. Christ even tells the Pharisees at one point that they make their followers twice as much children of hell as themselves. They are leading people astray by the example of their works because their works have the wrong object and intent. And because of their example, the people were developing a distorted image of what God was really like.

Like the Laodiceans, the Pharisees also considered themselves to be rich and increased with goods and in need of nothing. Notice the parable that Christ speaks about the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18.

Luke 18:9-14 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone

who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Even though the Pharisees in general made a big deal about tithing and giving alms and sacrifices, there is evidence that they are probably not all that bad off financially. They had a regular racket going on at the Temple where they would grossly overcharge people for sacrificial animals. Matthew 23 also mentions that they stole property from the widows, so they probably were physically rich and increased with goods in large part because of their own greed.

But material wealth by itself is neutral, and the letter to the Laodiceans is not conditional upon a person's salary. The issue here is not how much money a person has, but what they put their trust in. Every man has his own treasure and for things that he values. And that treasure does not have to be material wealth.

So for a man who is rich, it would be easy for him to put his trust in his riches. But if a man is poor and does not have riches to trust in, the natural thing, that is the carnal thing is to trust in himself.

This is exactly what Christ describes here about this Pharisee. His wealth, or the lack thereof, was not an issue. The problem was that he trusted in himself, as it says in verse 9. He trusted in himself so much that his entire prayer was extolling his own virtues. In essence, he set himself up as his own savior, and because he did not need the blood of Jesus Christ, Christ says, in essence, "Have it your own way. My blood will not cover you." And so he was not justified, as verse 14 says.

The average Pharisee, just like Christ describes in the letter to the Laodicea, did not need anything. He did not need to change. He did not need to overcome. He did not need to grow. He did not need a Savior, because he had his own standard of righteousness that made him look pretty rosy. And because he did not need any mercy from God, he saw no reason to extend any mercy to anyone else either. And this is part of the reason that the Pharisees tended to abuse the very ones that they are supposed to be teaching while sitting in Moses' seat.

Also like the Laodiceans, Christ's assessment and analysis of the Pharisees was extremely different from their own. Christ says the Laodiceans are “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked,” which is the exact opposite of how they saw themselves. Likewise, He says of the Pharisees that they are hypocrites, blind guides, fools, lawbreakers, murderers, and a generation of vipers. The way that they judge things was very different from the way that Christ judged them.

On numerous occasions, Jesus Christ calls the Pharisees blind. They are blind because their judgment was perverted. They were making incorrect evaluations because everything was skewed in their own favor. They were not placing the right emphasis, or the right priority on the things of God, but instead they were emphasizing their own interests.

This blindness manifested itself in badly lopsided laws and regulations. The spiritual blindness of the Pharisees caused them to favor some minor principle over vastly more important ones. They would pick and choose among their favorite details of the law and completely overlook God's true intent. Because they did not place values on things in the same way that God did, they were always judging things contrary to the way that God judged them. And so when it came to evaluating themselves, because their judgment was so lopsided, they could only see their own righteousness.

This, of course, is the same problem that Christ castigates the Laodicean church for. They are blind to their own spiritual condition, and the blindness to reality extends to others, to other parts of their lives.

The letter to the Laodiceans does not mention this, but in the Pharisees, the self-assurance and infallibility went so far that they killed God's messengers, His prophets, and even persecuted and arranged for the murder of the Son of God. They were so sure that they were correct, that they reacted violently to anyone who dared call them into account. The thought of being corrected was the farthest thing from their minds. Rather than being meek and teachable, they are willing to strike out at those who exposed them for what they were.

In these few examples we have seen just some of the many ways that the letter to the Laodicean church applies to the Pharisees. By extension, we can

see many of the examples of the Pharisees that would also be applicable to the end time church. In fact, the biggest difference seems to be that the Laodiceans have entered into the New Covenant with God, and this makes them more accountable than the Pharisees. Everything else seems to be just a matter of degrees.

The Pharisees were very exacting in their interpretation of the law, while the Laodiceans interpret God's law with liberality and complacency, but they are alike in that they are both interpreting the law according to their own standard of righteousness, and as a result, both are very comfortable with themselves.

We can take these principles much farther than just the Pharisees and the Laodiceans though. We can apply this to every belief system in the satanic world. Note the interchange that occurs between Christ and the Pharisees after He cast out a demon back in Matthew 12.

Matthew 12:24-26 Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, "This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons." But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?"

We are going to briefly consider Christ's statement in verse 26, because it gives us a small glimpse into Satan's kingdom. Jesus essentially says that any institution, whether a kingdom, nation, or household, can only prosper while it is unified, and there is some measure of harmony. The different elements of the institution must be united in a common goal, and even Satan's kingdom is no exception to this.

The Bible does not give any indication that Satan's kingdom was ever in danger of collapsing because of internal corruption, although there is undoubtedly a very large measure of that. A demon is, after all, by definition corrupt. I do not mean to say that the demons get along like one big happy family, or that there is peace and harmony. But within Satan's kingdom there is some element that keeps it from crumbling internally. We know that it

lasted for at least 4,000 years from before the time Satan tempted Adam and Eve until Christ came and qualified to be the ruler of the earth.

And yet even after that, Satan's kingdom has continued as a sort of brotherhood of thieves on a cosmic scale of malevolence. We have here the principle that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Satan and his demons were united enough in their purpose and intent that they bonded together in order to rebel against God, their enemy. And it appears that Satan's kingdom is united enough in an extreme hatred of God that it will continue right up until Christ returns and Satan is deposed of ruler of the earth.

We can see a reflection of this in the cultures and belief systems and lifestyles of this cosmos, this Babylonish system inspired by Satan. The cosmos by definition is a world established apart from God and violently opposed to God. It might seem like an impossibility to get the atheists, the neo-pagans, the Hindus, the Muslims, the Catholics, the agnostics, the Pharisees, and Laodiceans to ever agree on anything. But at the core they are all alike in their carnality and thus their enmity against God, as Romans 8:7 says.

Even though there are national disagreements and conflicts and divisions and even wars underneath this fog, the entire world, apart from those that God has called out, is united in its opposition to God and His law. Satan will do anything in his power to draw mankind away from true worship of God, and one of the most effective and subtle means of doing this is to encourage us to worship ourselves.

So why was Christ so fed up with the Pharisees and even more livid with the Laodiceans? Because, even though they have a form of the true religion, the object of worship is the self.

Our God truly is a jealous God.