

“Laodicea, U.S.A.”

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Christian Concerns Chapel Talk, delivered February 28, 2001

(Rev. 3:14-22.)

Some Roman persecution is the “hot” persecution you’ve just heard about: Christians in Philadelphia and elsewhere are being ‘outed’ and disowned by fellow Jews (after all, Jews probably value their hard-won reputation for getting along with Roman authorities), jailed and martyred. But in other cities, the pressure is a lot more subtle. It’s “warm” persecution.

Now I’m not sure *exactly* what’s happening at Laodicea. Maybe things there are peaceful. Maybe its “lukewarm” Christians have learned how to stay under the radar. At any rate, the church there is well-off and complacent. “I’ve prospered, and I need nothing,” they say. “I’m good.”

Persecution is harassment due to belief. What’s happening here falls outside *some* definitions of persecution. Then why do *these people* get a letter from Jesus? Because they have bought into a corrupt system, and it’s killing their discipleship. This is a rich, proud city. The *pax Romana* is *their* peace. The Roman economy is *their* economy. They value *self-determination*. They speak in the first-person singular: Not “*we* need nothing,” but “*I* need nothing.” They aren’t even a community! They’re just a collection of individuals who think they’re better off than they were four years ago. They probably even think they’re rich because God *loves them so much!*

I’ve heard that if you throw a frog in a kettle of boiling water, the frog jumps out right away, and survives. But if you throw a frog in a kettle of cold water, then *heat* it to boiling, the frog never jumps. Warm persecution can be more effective than hot persecution. It doesn’t make headlines, or martyrs, or sympathizers. Just frog stew.

The pressure in Laodicea is so seductive that *everyone* has fallen for it, and so subtle that no one realizes a thing. Everyone’s too busy counting the cash to notice that they’re all wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. They’re expecting a love-note from their warm, fuzzy, upper-middle-class Jesus, and instead they get an angel-gram: “I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”

(Here’s where my talk gets uncomfortable.)

Revelation is about the coming fall of the Church’s greatest enemy: imperial Rome, code-named “Babylon.” And Rome looks a lot like America. As the world’s peacekeeper, we make alliances and fight wars to help keep the world peaceful on *our* terms. We are the center of the world economy. We just fought the battle of the century, over whether capitalism or socialism can manufacture more idols with more efficiency. And we won. We won *big*. Now no one is in the mood to hear that our national mythology puts us on the wrong side of God’s kingdom.

See, the United Nations is not the beast. When the angel throws Babylon into the sea, and the merchants and investors and politicians weep and wail, they’re talking about California!

We Americans, and especially we Californians, live in a society of immense power. The world watches our TV shows and movies, and listens to our music. It buys our brands. It eats our fast food. It speaks our language. It uses our software. It imitates our politics – and we isolate those who don’t. Our culture wants the whole world to look a certain way: democratic, capitalistic, modern, individualistic, consumeristic, and *private* and *pluralistic* in matters of faith.

Our culture wants American Christians to fit this mold too. Did you think we don’t tell our poor that wealth will solve their problems, and our rich that wealth *has* solved their

problems? Did you think *we* aren't being pressured to conform to the demands of global democratic capitalism, and punished when our faith gets in the way?

Besides professing in theology, I program computers. One day I was leading a training session, teaching people how to maintain our software. During a lunch break, I got in a conversation with a woman on the client's team. She was a Jewish Marxist, as far as I could tell. We got along great. We were poking at each other's arguments, having fun. But her boss, who leads their team, was getting more and more nervous. "OK, let's settle down," he finally said. He thought a religious war was going to break out. And *that* would be bad for productivity!

Defer to the demands of business. Be a team-player. Shut up about God, even during lunch breaks. Keep your religion to yourself.

Think of the person on your left and on your right. Think of your family, your suite-mates, your teachers and your students. Like you, they are persecuted, and probably blind to it.

Still think I'm exaggerating? Think about the messages we take most seriously in this culture. See if you know the products behind these mottoes: "Obey your thirst." "Have it your way." "Don't bother me. I'm eating." "Just do it." "Defy convention." "Think different." "It's everywhere you want to be."

How many of you could score as well on a Bible content exam?

In hot persecution, Christians are targets. In warm persecution, Christians are target *markets*. Babylon spends megabucks on mottoes that are more appropriate for gods than fast food. These teach us that money is a means to our happiness. They tell us to put ourselves first (but really, *the products* first). To define ourselves and gain status by an affiliation not with Jesus Christ, but with a brand name. And wow, it works! If I want to make trouble in class, I just make a snide remark about Colgate or Pepsi or Macintosh computers. Many of us are much more loyal to these things than to our denomination. We switch local churches more willingly than we switch toothpaste. We may be lukewarm – but not about our soda-pop.

So what do we do about warm persecution? First, see it for what it is. Anoint our eyes with the Gospel, and we'll see that *correction*, not *wealth*, is a sign of God's love.

Second, switch to *Jesus*. (This seems to trivialize Jesus, like he's a brand. But when brands are gods, there's *nothing* trivial about them.) "Buy from me – gold refined by fire so that you *may* be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see." I think this is just *beautiful*. Jesus always knows just what we need. To a people who can't see anything but the dollar signs in their own eyes, Jesus sends a shopping list. You think life is shopping? OK, he says, let's go. I'll drive. Let's spend your money on *real* clothes and *real* medicine. "Buy from me."

This is *not* about just having some inner attitude that we *would* give up our wealth if Jesus *actually* required it. Jesus knows that's a cop-out. This is about *actions*. Only when we spend and save sacrificially will we *stop* sacrificing to Caesar. If ours are the economics of the Kingdom, we'll no longer have the means to buy and sell with the beast.

How do we buy with Jesus? "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking. If someone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him or her, and he or she with me." Remember the "I" in "*I* need nothing"? Jesus' answer is the "we" of friendship. Invest and spend on fellowship – with Jesus, with each other, with the Church in Sudan, with all whom Jesus loves. Buy for the love of neighbors, not the false security of wealth.

There are *two* kinds of treasure in Revelation: The wealth of Babylon, all of which is laid waste (18:19); and the treasure of the nations, which is brought into the New Jerusalem to shine forever (21:26). Jesus ends his tough-love letter to Laodicea with a promise: For all its power, warm persecution can be conquered. Jesus is knocking at our door, ready to take us on some *real* shopping. In him, we can earn the treasure of our nations, rather than the wealth of Babylon.

I have earnings, and savings, political power, and financial obligations. These things do not *need* to be idolatrous. I'm actually *glad* that we can participate in a representative democracy, and that we can engage in relatively free enterprise. However, unless I buy from Jesus, they become my own little piece of Babylon. I become poor, blind, and wretched. In fact, I become a *persecutor*. But *when* I buy from Jesus, my victims and I are liberated, and we sit together on Jesus' throne.

Revelation's seven letters come together, which means that we're all *in this* together. Our brothers and sisters under hot persecution know it. They're praying *for us* to make it through *our* warm persecution. *They* are praying *for us!* The *least* we can do for them is to respect their prayers by taking our own persecution as seriously as we take theirs.