

October 5, 2024

Revelation 3:1-6

I have a confession. I almost skipped this letter in our sermon series because I actually preached on it on Ash Wednesday back in February. Yet, after reading this, studying it, letting it hit me, I've concluded that of all the letters that Jesus sends to these seven churches, this one may be the most applicable for American Christians. Why? Because unlike the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, or Pergamum, the Christians in Sardis likely weren't suffering any kind of severe poverty or death threats. They didn't have to make tough choices between career and Jesus or confront shocking immoral behavior in their congregations like the church in Thyatira. They were just okay. The church in Sardis was, from what we can tell, comfortable and happy and according to everyone else, very much alive! It was a busy church- a lot of meetings and activities and groups- they were spending a lot of time together doing a lot of things, and the Christians who were the original audience of these letters, especially the ones who knew about the different churches, would expect Jesus to have so many good things to say about the church in Sardis. But he doesn't. There's nothing for Jesus to commend- that's the first time we've seen that in these letters- he always has something good to say about these churches, but not Sardis. Jesus uses some fascinating picture language to identify himself like normal- he has the "Seven Spirits" in hand- referencing the Holy Spirit- Father, Son, Holy Spirit, who is given credit for bringing people to faith and keeping them strong in the Faith, Jesus is saying that bringing people to spiritual life and keeping them alive is an act of God! Then Jesus says he has the seven stars in his hand- that means the Churches- all of his churches are in his hand. He loves them. He cherishes them. Which is why he's going to tell them exactly what they don't want to hear.

"You are dead. You look alive. People think you're alive. You're busy. You're active. You're doing a lot of things. And you are absolutely dead, and your works are not pleasing to me. I don't like them. You busy yourself with all the things I never asked you to do, and the things I've asked you to do, you don't care much for. You are dead. Therefore, Wake up!" Or, taken more literally, "Be on guard!" Fascinating- why does Jesus say it like this? The city of Sardis sits surrounded by mountains and cliffs. When Jesus spoke these words to them, Sardis was a big, luxurious, rich, decadent city with an embarrassing history. Five hundred years before there was a church there, Sardis was a prominent trading city and a stronghold. The invading army of the Persian Empire knew that it would be suicide to attempt to invade the city because the cliffs, mountains, and walls were too high. The problem was, the people of Sardis knew it too. One day, Persian spies saw that there was a passageway into the city through the cliffs. They expected that it would be heavily guarded, but when the invading soldiers went to that path, it was unguarded, the soldiers protecting the city were asleep- so confident that no one could ever invade Sardis- and the city was taken over just like that. The exact same thing happened 300 years later by Greeks. The guards get overconfident, sleepy, and it destroys them. Sardis was a place of drunkenness, indulgence, sleepiness, comfort, and a "Whatever" kind of attitude, and the Sardis mindset is creeping into the Christian church there. There are enemies at their gates, and their

passageway is unguarded! They need to wake up! Jesus says they need to strengthen what is left- not everyone in that church was spiritually dead. But they would be, and they need to focus on what's important and repent. Repent of what? Jesus doesn't specifically say.

We know that in Sardis there was a temple to the Goddess Cybele, who was a fertility goddess, and the way she was worshiped was through drunken orgies and temple prostitution, and that Sardis was kind of the Las Vegas of ancient Western Turkey- filled with drunkenness, wild parties, sexual immorality, and it could have been that the Christians were indulging in that. It could have been that the Christians were very focused on the poor and doing nice things for their neighbors, but not actually doing the hard work of calling people to repent of their sins and teaching them to obey Jesus. Whatever it was, their works were not what Jesus asked them, and Jesus says, "remember." Jesus wants them to remember what they learned at first, that He, true God, came down from Heaven and became like them, and suffered for them, so they could be clothed with his perfection. Notice the picture Jesus uses. Their "robes," were filthy- their lives were filthy in God's eyes, and they wouldn't be allowed in God's house. But Jesus paid for their sins, and he gives all who believe in him his perfection, it covers their filth and now all God sees is "perfect." Jesus promises that although they are dead, Jesus can bring them back to life, and that he has them in his hand, and their names are written on the book of life, and that because of what he's done, he will claim them as his brothers and sisters on the last day before God the Father. That's what Jesus has to say to his people in Sardis, and there are two major applications to make from this:

1. A Church can be busy and dead. 2. The Gospel-Centered Church is the Living Church.

1. A church can be busy and dead. The Old Testament lesson today taught us something profoundly important. God wants us to do what he commands, not just be busy. Churches are not just there to exist, but to do God's Work. Again, notice that Jesus doesn't say they weren't doing anything, but that their works were not up to his standard- they weren't actually doing what he wanted them to do. I think this is a unique temptation for churches today, including us. Sometimes, churches get really into the community, and they are so busy providing free meals, free clothes, free resources, organizing charities, all kinds of things. Is there anything wrong with that? Of course not- those are good things. But what does Jesus call the Church to do? Make disciples and teach them to obey what he has commanded. If a church is feeding people's stomachs, but not addressing their spiritual needs, they may be very busy, but they aren't doing what Jesus calls churches to do. Sometimes, churches get really into politics and social issues- such as abortion. Let's be clear. Jesus loves and values all human life, even while its in the womb, and in the same way that Maddie and I don't have the right to get rid of our young daughter because she's getting in the way of our career, or she's financially and emotionally straining, no one has the right to purposely snuff out human life in the womb. Does that mean we should be organizing protests as a church? Does that mean we should be putting signage all over our church and making sure people know we're the "pro-life church?" No. Why not? Firstly,

because who would that help? Would anyone actually change their minds and suddenly think, “maybe I’m wrong about this issue?” Probably not. In fact, many people would see us and say, “hm, I’m never going there,” and our business and activities would actually get in the way of what Jesus has called us to do- bring people to Christ. If we really want to address the moral issues in our culture, shaming people isn’t the way to go. Bringing them to believe in Jesus and over time teaching them to obey and believe what he says is- that’s what Jesus calls us to do. Why is this so important?

2. The Gospel-centered church is always alive. If you’ve been with us at all in the last few weeks, you may notice a theme with these letters from Jesus. They can get a bit harsh. And this may be one of Jesus’ harshes letters- he has nothing good to say about this church- but notice what he doesn’t do in this or any of these letters. He never simply says, “do better.” He doesn’t scold them and say, “figure it out, shape up,” nor does he give them really great advice. What does he do? He tells them to remember. Remember the Gospel. In the Bible, if you look closely, you’ll notice something. There are times when it tells us what to do and not do, what happens to us if we disobey, and ultimately that we have all disobeyed God and deserve to die. There are also times when God comforts his people and says, even though you have dishonored me and stained yourself with selfishness, evil, foolishness and deserve nothing from me, I’m going to give you everything.” ANd he did, Jesus came to be our sacrifice, to take on our ugliness, our sin, our shame, our guilt, suffer for it, and then give us his perfect life, his good deeds, his obedience, it’s put on us like a robe so when God looks at you, he doesn’t see how nasty you are, but loves and accepts you as if you were as perfect as Jesus. Jesus tells these dead, lifeless, has-been Christians- remember this. You see, when Christians are dead, Jesus doesn’t give them advice. He kills them. He kills their pride, their idea that they are good enough, and tells them how awful they are. The Law. But then he brings them to life and reminds them of what he’s done for them and why they are absolutely forgiven and perfect and assures them that they are his, written in his book of life, chosen by him, all of this given to them all for free- they don’t earn a thing! That’s how Jesus brings people to spiritual life. And that’s what Jesus ultimately calls us to do. Enjoy his forgiveness. Repent of your evil, and find the joy and comfort he wants you to have by knowing how forgiven and perfect you are because of what he did for you. That’s what makes us alive.

One final thought: Guard your heart and be ready for battle. Satan was very active in Sardis, just like he was active in tempting and hurting Christians in the other cities. But his hurting Christians in Sardis wasn’t like the others- the others he was shooting arrows and attacking them in an open, violent way. In Sardis, it was more like when the enemy soldiers snuck in the back unnoticed, unheard, and therefore unchallenged. Satan tempted them not with hardship, but comfort and a pleasant life so they forgot God and didn’t really need him anymore. I’d suspect that’s often how he works today. If a church isn’t being afflicted by Satan, isn’t going through hard things and difficult struggles, Satan isn’t trying to destroy and kill that church, it’s probably

because he doesn't need to. It's already dead. Don't let Satan fool you into thinking he doesn't exist. I'll end with this quote from a Lutheran commentator who sums it up so well. *It has been asked what it is that these in Sardis conquered since neither persecution, heresy, nor fanaticism are mentioned in this letter. These are not the only foes. The great foes that threaten our spiritual life directly are carelessness, indifference, sleep and sloth, failure to remember, to keep, to continue in repentance, to avoid the world's foulness. Are not these enough for us to conquer? They creep in and with stealth and are thus most dangerous. Unrecognized, they often do their damage unseen. Open, blatant hostility we easily see and brace ourselves against its assaults: but inner decay works when no defense is made. Those are heroes who fight the open foes; but no less are those heroes who conquer the insidious, intangible creeping death.*

Remember how valuable you are, and stay on guard. Amen.