

SARDIS: APPEARING LIVELY
Revelation 3:1-6
July 20, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

We look this morning at the fifth of the letters from our Lord to the seven churches in Revelation, the letter to the church at Sardis. Culturally, Sardis was perhaps more like the conditions we face in the United States more than any of the others. Situated 35 miles north of Thyatira, it was situated at the junction of five roads, providing the opportunity for a thriving commerce. The city was built on a hill so steep that its inhabitants thought it to be nearly invincible. The geographical location of the city provided it the opportunity for great wealth and defense. However, these privileges became the city's great stumbling block. Sardis was twice overtaken by surprise, first by Cyrus the Persian (549 BC) followed by Antiochus (218 BC). These armies found soldiers that were over-confident, so much so that they had abandoned their watches at night. The city was later rebuilt by the emperor Tiberius and it is this city that the church at Sardis was founded.

If one word could be used to describe what led to the situation that the church found itself in when they received this letter, it would be *slackness*. They had become comfortable in themselves, borrowing from the materialism and false sense of security that the city provided. While Sardis had its share of deity worship like the other cities, they were apparently spared from the persecutions like those found at Smyrna and Pergamum. There is no mention of the heresies or false teachings found in the prior churches. Simply put, the church at Sardis had it very comfortable compared to the others. However, comfort often leads to apathy that in turn leads to forgetfulness. That describes the church at Sardis where we see a church that pleased men but failed to please God. In this church we see *the great danger of taking the things of God for granted*.

I. The Necessities for Spiritual Life (3:1a)

Christ began each of these letters with a description of Himself taken from chapter 1. Here the description is taken from His initial greeting to John (1:4) and from His appearance to John (1:16, 20).¹ From His introduction to the church at Sardis, we see from Christ Himself what is necessary to begin and sustain spiritual life, something that this church had forgotten.

1. The Holy Spirit

Christ described Himself as “**He who has the seven Spirits of God.**” Some look at this as being a group of angelic beings corresponding to each of the seven angels of these churches. However, if this were the case, then Jesus would simply be repeating Himself in the next phrase where He refers to “**the seven stars**” which He had earlier told John were the seven angels (1:20). The immediate context will not allow for such an interpretation.

Further, the general context gives us a better rendering as to what “**the seven Spirits of God**” refers. In His initial greeting to John in Revelation 1:4-5 we read,⁴ “Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come (here a reference to the Father), and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne,⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Leon Morris correctly asserts

¹ William Hendriksen, *NTC: Revelation*, 149-150.

that “coming between references to the Father and the Son it is more probable that this is an unusual way of designating the Holy Spirit.”²

If this be true, then what we have is a reference to the fullness, designated by the number “seven,” of the Holy Spirit. The phrase may refer to the passage we read earlier in Isaiah 11:2 which gives a sevenfold description of the nature and operations of the Spirit, “The Spirit of the LORD... (1), the spirit of wisdom (2) and understanding (3), the spirit of counsel (4) and strength (5), the spirit of knowledge (6) and the fear of the LORD (7).” This Holy Spirit Christ both received and sent into the world so that unbelieving men might know the truth of who He is.

John 6:63 – It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.

John 14:26 – But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

John 15:26 – When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, *that is* the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me.

This is certainly not an exhaustive list of the works of the Holy Spirit, but those that would prove to be pertinent to this church: The Spirit gives life, not the flesh. The Spirit teaches truth. The Spirit helps us to remember the truth. We see from this description of Christ the necessity of the Holy Spirit in all His fullness for spiritual life to begin and continue, both individually and corporately. There is no life in an individual or in a church where the Spirit of God is not present.

2. The Word of Truth

Christ further referred to Himself as “**He who has... the seven stars.**” The stars are described in 1:20 as “the angels of the seven churches.” Christ also introduced Himself in this way to the church at Ephesus. There you might remember I mentioned that there is debate as to whether these are literal angels, or whether they represent the “messenger” or pastor in each church, or whether the angel is a type of personification of the church. The arguments for and against all of these views are not without merit and the identity of the angels is difficult to know with any certainty.

However, as was the case with the church at Ephesus, regardless of the identity of “**the seven stars**” or “the seven angels,” the function of these would be the same. The word in the Greek for “angels” literally means “messenger” or “sent one.” Christ’s messenger, again, regardless of their identity, would have one purpose, to deliver His message, His truth, His Word, to His people. “**He who has... the seven stars**” and “holds the seven stars in His right hand” (2:1) designates His authority over these messengers and their message. They were to proclaim the good news of the gospel and the whole counsel of God. They were to deliver His message, not their own. It is through His Word alone illuminated by the Holy Spirit that life begins and is sustained.

So we see in this introduction of Christ the necessity of both Spirit and Word in granting and sustaining spiritual life. The Spirit never contradicts the Word nor does the Word ever go against the promptings of the Spirit. John Calvin put it this way, “We obtain nothing from the hearing of the Word alone, without the grace of the Spirit, and that the Spirit is conferred on us not that He may produce contempt of the Word, but rather to instill confidence in it in our minds

² Leon Morris, *TNTC: Revelation*, 49.

and write it on our hearts.”³ “We must never divorce what God has married, namely his Word and his Spirit. The Word of God is the Spirit's sword. The Spirit without the Word is weaponless; the Word without the Spirit is powerless” (The Message of Thessalonians pg. 34).⁴

II. The Danger of Deception (3:1b, 2b)

Some years ago I was sitting at a Back Yard Burger eating and minding my own business when an unusual sight grabbed my attention. As I gazed out the window, I noticed a bicycle moving across the parking lot across the street. What was unusual about what I saw was that the bicycle had no rider! Now before you pass judgment on what might have been in my burger that caused such delusion, allow me to explain what really occurred. The parking lot across the street was sunken below the grade of the road. What I actually saw was a bicycle carried on top of a car which was moving through the parking lot. However, due to the lot being below grade, my eyes were blinded to the car. All I saw was a bicycle with no rider. For a brief moment, I was deceived.

Deception is defined as giving a false impression. Deception blinds one from the truth because all of the facts are not known. That was Christ's assessment of the church at Sardis. They had a deceiving appearance. Christ, who knows all things and has nothing hidden from His sight, indicted the church for their deception, for giving the appearance of a lively, vibrant church while in reality they were “**dead.**”

Jesus' assessment was without His usual commendation of a church. The churches we have seen to this point, those that were loveless and tolerant, have some word of commendation. No such word is given the church at Sardis. Jesus condemned them for their spiritual deadness. This church describes many today that have a “**name**” in the community or their denomination. “**Name**” implies their reputation, one that, on this occasion, is looked at as favorable. Sardis had all the “signs” of life. In today's lingo, they had numerous programs and activities for their congregation and community. They were a growing church, at least by today's pragmatic way of assessing growth in a church simply by counting heads or cars in the parking lot or size of their buildings.

However, as is often the case today, this church paid no attention to the way that they were growing. In reality, they were nothing more than a social club with a churchy veneer. Unfortunately, there exist many churches much like Sardis today. They build their churches on the latest marketing principles or pragmatic church growth fads, often neglecting altogether the sure foundation and cornerstone, Jesus Christ. Their worship services cater to the felt needs of people rather than the glory of Christ. The focus is on self rather than the risen Savior, all in an effort to add numbers to the church. However, while they might add to the church, often they do not add to the kingdom.

While I could give numerous examples of such practices, a couple will suffice to show how a church can give the appearance of life while being dead. One large Southern Baptist church has as a focal point in their children's ministry a fire truck, complete with bells and sirens to attract children to their worship. What child would not want to attend a church that has a fire truck? But they go a step further. The fire truck serves as the baptistry for the children. When a child is baptized, bells and whistles go off, complete with laser lights, and there is a great celebration.

³ John Calvin, <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/wordspirit.html>, accessed 07/19/2008.

⁴ http://www.monergism.com/directory/link_category/Regeneration/Word-and-Spirit-in-Conversion/, accessed 07/19/2008.

And the church is not only growing, but has a good reputation in the community and the denomination.

Another church actually has stated that they borrow from Disney, Looney Toons, and Nickelodeon to enhance their children's ministry. Their thought is that we must meet the children on a level that they are accustomed to, and what better place than from the secular culture where they spend much of their viewing time. Other churches have incorporated Nintendo and Wi into their children's ministry in an effort to appeal to the unchurched. All of this is done in the guise of evangelism – and their churches are “growing.”

Jesus had a different assessment of churches like Sardis. They are **“dead”** because they have substituted activities and programs for true spirituality. They had become comfortable with their “easiness.” However, comfort always provides a temptation to slackness. They had a deceiving appearance of liveliness but they were dead. The church was simply going through the motions, as evidenced by Christ's rebuke, **“I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God.”** While their deeds, deeds which they thought were right, might have been acceptable to others, they were not to Christ. Most at Sardis were living a lie, and Christ in His grace and mercy offered the solution for their deadness and deception.

III. The Cure for Deadness (3:2-4)

In verse 4 we see that there remained a few believers who remained faithful even in the midst of the deadness. However, they were so few that Jesus overall assessment of the church was that it was dead. The glory had all but departed, but there remained hope before “Ichabod” would be placed over the doorpost (see 1 Sam. 4:21-22). John MacArthur points out that God had His remnant even at Sardis.⁵ These were the ones who had not yet **“soiled their garments,”** whose deeds were still considered faithful according to Christ's judgment. What would revive the deadness of this congregation?

1. Watchfulness (v. 2a)

Jesus commanded them to **“wake up”** or **“be alert.”** These were words that these at Sardis would understand given the history of their city, a city that had twice been overtaken by the enemy because of their lack of vigilance. The tense is a continuous present designating that they were to continually be watchful for the enemy, both within the church and without. This was no time for indifference, for thinking that all was lost and the cause was hopeless. The remnant needed to evaluate the condition of the church and confront the slackness that had got them in this predicament. In doing so they would **“strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die.”** More than one commentator speaks of fanning the embers into a flame. While there might not be but a few smoldering embers, Christ would honor Spirit-filled Christians who sought to be watchful and strengthen what remained.

2. Remembrance (v. 3a)

They were then to **“remember”** what they had **“received and heard.”** As I noted earlier, when one becomes slack, it often leads to apathy and soon to forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is the mark of sin in the life of a believer. We forget the most important things in life, even the wonder of the gospel itself. That is why Christ gave the church a remembrance meal called the Lord's

⁵ John MacArthur, *Because the Time Is Near*, 83.

Supper, a visual time for us to “**remember**” the gospel and “proclaim His death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

Here, however, Christ has the Word proclaimed in mind. By this time much of the New Testament would have been in circulation. The church at Sardis would have received the whole revelation of God. Christ tells them to remember what had been passed down to them, the teachings of Scripture that, along with the Spirit, had brought them to faith and served as the foundation upon which the church was established. The language used carries the idea of remembering the gospel. They were to remember it, reflect on how it had changed their lives, and meditate on it day after day. Jerry Bridges somewhere stated that we ought to preach the gospel to ourselves daily. That is what Christ commanded these at Sardis, and us today as well.

3. Obedience (v. 3b)

Jesus commanded them to “**keep it.**” The idea is to treasure the gospel, to savor it. Those who have received and heard will long to obey what the Scriptures teach. The church at Sardis was blinded by all of their programs and activities. Their busyness had deceived them and others. While they thought they were obeying, they had neglected the truth and were following their way instead of God’s. They had failed to perform the “good works” that God had prepared them for, selling out to the secularism that surrounded them. Phil Newton described them this way:

It’s the obedience to Christ’s commands, walking in love and service toward others, bearing witness to the gospel in the community, forgiving those that have wronged you, being tenderhearted toward your brothers, giving yourself to prayer, and such as this that the church had neglected. They feigned obedience. They picked out commands of what looked pleasurable to them in the same way that one might pick out his favorite foods in a cafeteria line. They lacked the seriousness that must mark disciples of Jesus Christ. Obedience appeared more of an option than a passion.⁶

Therefore, Jesus tells them to renew their passion, to remember and treasure the Word of God.

4. Repent (v. 3c)

Finally, Christ commanded them to “**repent.**” None of the aforementioned would have done any good if there was not genuine repentance for sin and disobedience. They must turn from their spiritual apathy and slackness which had led to their deadness. They must repent of neglecting the gospel and for haphazardly approaching their work of ministry. They must refuse to accept the world’s applause and man’s approval when the gospel was diluted and Christ was not glorified. They were to have a genuine heart change concerning those elements of worship, their activities and programs that might have brought men closer to one another but failed to draw men into the presence of God. They must return to an understanding that true worshippers worship in Spirit and in truth (what was Christ’s description of Himself?).

If they failed to wake up, and by implication remember, obey, and repent, the righteous judgment of Christ awaited, and His reproof would be swift. “**Like a thief**” points to the unexpectedness and the imminence of His judgment. This is often associated with the Lord’s return, but here the context points to a more immediate destruction of the church if there was no reformation and revival. In other words, there was a promise that the glory would depart and that “Ichabod” should be written on its doorpost (see 1 Sam. 4:21-22).

⁶ Phil Newton, http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/revelation_03.01-06.html, accessed 07/19/2008.

IV. The Promise for the Faithful (3:5-6)

Christ concludes the letter as the others with promises to those who remain faithful, to those who overcome or conquer temptations and trials, sufferings and persecutions. While the few faithful might not have had the persecution from without that existed in some of the other churches, they would no doubt receive it from those inside the church as they sought to confront and rebuke the slackness in the church, as they sought to steer the church in a biblical direction, as they sought to reform the church. While their way would be difficult, the blessings of heaven would far outweigh the difficulties of this world.

1. Clothed in righteousness

“They will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments.” (See 7:13-14; 19:7-8)

2. Eternal security

“And I will not erase his name from the book of life.”

3. Confessed by Christ

“And I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.”

Matthew 10:32 – Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven.

Luke 12:8 – And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God;

Conversely, **2 Timothy 2:12** – If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us.

Conclusion

If Christ were to write a letter to Grace Covenant Baptist this morning, what would He say? We have looked at other churches that Christ might assess as dead, those that are busy with activities, programs, and counting heads. But what about us? We must consider the warning that Christ gives us through the church at Sardis, who serves as a bad example of what constitutes a biblical church. They were dead because they had become lazy and apathetic. They had taken for granted the good things of Christ and were simply going through the motions.

(1) We must take care to guard our gates in this regard. Do we give an appearance of being alive, but are dead? As a congregation, perhaps not, but the warning is there. We too can become focused on the wrong things and presume upon God’s goodness. My prayer is that God would protect us from the ease and comfort of our culture.

(2) But what about you as an individual? Are you giving the appearance of life, but are dead? Then may I remind you what Christ calls you – a hypocrite! Are you enduring with Him or denying Him? Are you living by faith each and every day, walking with God and Christ in sweet communion with Him? Be honest here. Is it possible that you have become like this church, lazy, slack, comfortable more with the things of this world than that which is above?

(3) Pray for the remnant!