

What standards are to be used to determine whether or not a church is alive or dead—there are those who would assess a church based upon its size, its music ministry, its budget, its youth group, its activities—if these things are present then a church is alive, if they are absent then a church is dead—and if these are fair and appropriate standards then our church would admittedly be dead—but brethren, I suggest that the Lord uses a different standard in determining whether or not a church is alive or dead...

For example, if you recall, in sending the prophet Samuel to anoint a king from the house of Jesse, the Lord passed by the first seven sons, and anointed the eighth, for as the Lord said to Samuel, 1Sam.16:7—“for the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart...”—we find a similar thing in those words of our Savior to the Pharisees, who gave the appearance that they were righteous, Lk.16:15—“you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God...”

In both of these instances we learn two important truths—[1] mere external appearances can be deceptive, and [2] the Lord looks upon and knows the heart—thus what matters to Him is not merely the external but the internal—what concerns Him is that there be spiritual life within the heart, which of course will manifest itself in external ways, but a person can possess the appearance of those activities and lack the inward life...

For the past few months we have been considering our Savior’s counsels to the seven churches, which brings us this week to the fifth church, the church at Sardis—if you recall we saw [1] in the church at Ephesus a busy church that had left its first love, [2] in the church at Smyrna a persecuted church, which was on the verge of an intensified time of suffering, [3] in the church at Pergamos we saw a church that was holding fast to Christ even though some were being put to death, yet, a church that had compromised with false teachers, [4] in the church at Thyatira we saw a church that was growing in works, yet, was tolerating “that woman Jezebel” who was teaching the “deep things of Satan”—this then brings us to the church at Sardis, a church largely given over to formalism and hypocrisy, yet as we shall see tonight, a church that had a remnant of faithful people...

- I. An Introduction—v1a
- II. An Assessment—v1b,2b
- III. An Exhortation—vv2-3a

I. An Introduction—v1a

1. Having written to the first four churches our Savior now exhorts John to write—“to the angel of the church in Sardis...”
2. The city of Sardis lay about 30 miles south-east of Thyatira and was located in the fertile valley of the River Hermus just before the mountain range Tmolus...
3. The city could boast of a rich history, in that it was once the capital of the great kingdom of Lydia, during the 6th and 5th centuries before Christ...
4. By the first century it had become largely a shell of its former glory, and in many ways was in a similar condition as was the church...
5. Ramsay—“Sardis was one of the great cities of primitive history: in the Greek view it was long the greatest of all cities...[yet] in the Roman period it was almost like a city of the past, a relic of the period of barbaric warfare, which lived rather on its ancient prestige than on its suitability to present conditions...”
6. Our Savior identifies Himself as—“he who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...”—by “seven Spirits” our Savior refers to the Holy Spirit in all His fullness...
7. As there were seven churches, with seven angels [probably a reference to the leaders], so there are seven Spirits, a reference to the fullness of the Spirit’s presence...
8. Rev.1:4-5—“John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne; 5 and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood...”

9. Notice the Trinitarian nature of John's benediction—[a] the Father—"from Him who is and who was and who is to come..." [b] the Spirit—"and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne..." and [c] the Son—"and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first born from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth..."
10. The Scriptures teach the existence of one God, a single God that exists in three persons as Father, Son, and Spirit...
11. This single, Triune God acts within Himself and in creation, in such a way that various works are accredited to each person...
12. For example, with reference to the work of redemption, it was the Father who planned it, the Son who obtains it, and the Spirit who applies it...
13. Thus if you notice, John emphasizes various truths about each person of the Trinity—the Father's eternity, the Spirit's omni-presence, and the Son's redemptive work...
14. Thus the phrase—"the seven Spirits"—simply underscores the omni-presence of the Spirit—or the fact that He is everywhere present at once...
15. Ps.139:7-8—"where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend into heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, you are there..."
16. Notice our Savior describes Himself as—"He who has the seven Spirits of God..."—which is another way of describing the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ...
17. Historically we teach that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son—He is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ...
18. Never do we read within Scripture that the Spirit has the Son of God, but we do read that the Son has the seven Spirits of God...
19. My point is simply this—as Christ has authority over the seven stars [a reference to the ministers], so the Spirit is His Spirit...
20. Barns—"It was one of the highest characteristics that could be given of the Savior to say, that the Holy Spirit was his to send forth into the world, and that that great Agent, on whose gracious influences all were dependent for the possession of true religion, could be given or withheld by him at his pleasure..."
21. Rev.4:5—"and from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings, and voices. Seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God..."
22. Here the Holy Spirit is likened to—"seven lamps of burning fire..."—fire of course being a common imagery associated with the Spirit...
23. Thus John the Baptist said of Christ in Matt.3:11—"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire..." and then in fulfillment of that promise we read in Acts 2:2-3—"and suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and *one* sat upon each of them..."
24. This was the baptism of the Holy Spirit that John spoke of and said that Christ would give—it was the open declaration that the Spirit is given to the church without distinction for both Jew and Gentile...
25. Both in this passage and Rev.1:4, the Spirit is described as being—"before the throne..."—which describes the Spirit's relation to the one sitting upon the throne...
26. Just as the lightnings, thunderings, and voices proceeded from the throne, so the seven Spirits or the Holy Spirit proceeds from the throne...
27. Rev.5:6—"and I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it has been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth..."
28. Here the "seven Spirits" are described as the seven eyes of the lamb, which again underscores two things—[a] the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and [b] the Spirit is omni-present...
29. If you recall our Savior introduced Himself to each of His churches in such a way as to be especially relevant to each seven...
30. For example, to the church at Smyrna, a church facing death, our Savior reveals Himself as—"the first and the last, who was dead, and came to life..."
31. In other words—they shouldn't fear what their enemies could do, as Christ has conquered death, thus He promised them—"he who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death..."

32. Well in a similar fashion, our Savior here identifies Himself to the church at Sardis as—“He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...”
33. In other words—within this description our Savior has provided the church with an encouragement to assist them in their present predicament...
34. Let me suggest three thoughts as to why our Savior introduces Himself as—“He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...”
35. Notice [1] the Spirit and life—as we shall see in a moment, the church at Sardis was spiritually dead or dying...
36. Thus our Savior describes Himself as the one who “has the seven spirits”—that is the Holy Spirit who is the giver of life...
37. Jn.6:63—“it is the Spirit who gives life...”—that is, gives life in resurrecting the soul from death but also in reviving it in decay...
38. Hymn—“O Breath of Life, come sweeping through us, revive your church with life and power; O Breath of Life, come, cleanse, renew us and fit your church to meet this hour...”
39. John Stott—“What other message does a dead or declining church need to hear? It is the Holy Spirit who can breathe life into our formal worship and who can animate our dead works until they pulsate with life. He can rescue a dying church and make it a living force in the community. Let him once fill us with his vital presence, and our work, worship, and witness will all be marvelously transformed. The word of God tells us that we must pray in the Spirit, preach in the Spirit, worship in the Spirit, live in the Spirit, and walk in the Spirit. A stale church can be refreshed by him, a sleepy church awakened, a weak church strengthened, and a dead church made alive...”
40. Thus what the Christian church stands in need of is to be filled with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit...
41. Thus to be technical, a Christian does not need more of the Spirit as he needs the Spirit to have more of him...
42. John Stott—“Perhaps there is no more urgent message for 21 century Christians than the command: ‘Be filled with the Spirit.’ He dwells within us; but does he fill us? We possess him; but does he possess us...”
43. Notice [2] the Spirit and Christ—notice again our Savior expressly describes Himself as—“He who has the seven Spirits...”
44. The point being, the primary purpose of the Spirit is to reveal and to glorify Christ—thus the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ...
45. What encouragement this would give the church at Sardis—the Spirit that we so desperately need is the Spirit of my beloved Husband...
46. Wives—would your husband withhold something from you that he knew you needed—would he not provide for you needs in keeping with his ability...
47. Well dear brethren, our heavenly Husband has no lack, and He is more than willing to give to His needy bride as she applies to Him by faith...
48. Notice how our Savior approaches this church—a church that is characterized as dead and decaying—a church whose works were far from complete...
49. He approaches here as—He who has the seven Spirits—He approaches her as one able and willing to remedy her condition...
50. Oh my poor dead sinner friend—see here what Christ thinks of you—for He comes to in as well in this introduction...
51. Do you remember what He told that spiritually dead Samaritan woman in Jn.4:10—“If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, Give Me a drink, you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water...”
52. Oh my friend, listen to this gracious words—“He [that is Christ] would have given you living water...”—that is, His Spirit...
53. Do you remember those words He uttered on the last day of the feast, Jn.7:37-38—“if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water...”
54. John then adds in v39—“but this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive...”

55. Or what about His words in Prov.1:23, as Wisdom raises His voice in the open squares—“Turn at my rebuke; surely I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you...”
56. Oh my dear friends—if our Savior is so willing to give His Spirit to His enemies, how much more will He give Him to His friends...
57. Notice [3] the Spirit and the word—this point is implied in that Christ holds in one hand the seven Spirits and in the other hand the seven stars or messengers...
58. Thus Christ is reminding the church that He not only has the seven Spirits but also the hearts of the ministers given to preach the word...
59. Lenski—“These seven spirits are the Holy Spirit...all spiritual life is created by him...the Spirit works life and the activity of life only by means of the word, and this word is committed officially to the ministry which is symbolized by the seven stars...”

II. An Assessment—v1b, v2b

1. Having introduced Himself as—“he who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars...”—our Savior now provides a sobering assessment—“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead...”
2. I think it’s evident that fundamental to this assessment is the fact, that the church in Sardis was characterized by a dead formalism...
3. In other words—while it professed to be alive it was in fact dead—from every external appearance it looked as if it were a regular average church...
4. Matt.23:27-28—“woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men’s* bones and all uncleanness. 28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness...”
5. Hypocrisy can be defined as—“pretending to be something that we are not”—the word was used to describe an actor upon a stage...
6. The church in Sardis had a name that they were alive, but were dead—that is, they appeared to be one thing but were in fact another...
7. Notice the contrast between outward and inward—outwardly they appeared righteous but inwardly were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness...
8. Thus what is said of these men as individuals would be applied to the church at Sardis generally—while she had the appearance of life she was dead...
9. Hendriksen—“Sardis enjoyed a good reputation but it did not deserve this reputation. Whereas in Pergamum and in Thyatira a small element of the congregation had fallen into the temptation of the world, in Sardis the congregation as a whole had ‘defiled its garments...’”
10. Further in v2b our Savior’s assessment is expanded, v2b—“for I have not found your works perfect before God...”
11. The word rendered “perfect” means “complete”—it refers to a lack of lively faith and love as the source of their works...
12. Before man there works may have been found fine—“I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive...”—but before God—they were found incomplete...
13. We find an illustration of such incomplete works in those words of our Savior in Matt.15:8—“these people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me...”
14. They performed works such as prayer and worship—these they did with their mouth and lips but not with their hearts...
15. These appeared to be “good works” when examined externally, but when considered inwardly [or before God] they were incomplete...
16. Thus externally the church at Sardis looked complete—they worshiped God, they may have been growing numerically—but they were dead...
17. Before we move any further I think it’s important to notice, that the church in Sardis was dead to varying degrees...
18. In other words—there were those within the church that were totally death, that is they were unconverted, and then there were those who were in varying stages of decay...

19. But taken a whole, the church was dead, in that they were largely in a bad way—death was the best single description of the church as a whole...
20. MH—“If there was not a total privation of life, yet there was a great deadness in their souls and in their services, a great deadness in the spirits of their ministers, and a great deadness in their ministrations, in their praying, in their preaching, in their converse, and a great deadness in the people in hearing, in prayer, and in conversation; what little life was yet left among them was, in a manner, expiring, ready to die...”
21. Furthermore, we have to keep in mind that while our Savior speaks of the church collectively, a church is comprised of individuals...
22. Thus instead of asking the question—Is this church a dead church—we must ask the question—What is my individual state...
23. Thus I want to take a few minutes and suggest several signs or symptoms of spiritual death or decay, that if it is true of the majority, will kill a church...
24. Notice [1] spiritually dead people are alive to the world—that is, their lives are characterized by worldliness...
25. When Spiritual life comes into the soul, it always accompanies a death to the world—we can not be alive to both the world and God...
26. Gal.6:14—“may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world...”
27. Thus to the degree that spiritual life exists within our souls, so will be the degree that the world is dead to us...
28. Let me ask you my friend—is the world becoming more and more demanding to your time and affections—has it begun to squeeze out the things of God...
29. The Psalmist described dead sinners in Ps.10:4—“the wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts...”
30. Such a person goes through his daily routine with no thought of God—from morning to evening, week and month, after year...
31. And so a Christian who is in a state of declension or decay—they go through the day and week with little if any thought of God...
32. They think of work, their responsibility around the house, the children, their friends, sports, and movies and TV shows—but not God...
33. In short, those in a state of death or decay are devoid of a sober and serious spirit—they walk about this world with little if any consciousness of eternity...
34. Notice [2] spiritually dead people are insensitive to sin—with spiritual life comes a sensitivity to sin and wickedness...
35. A person who lacks a deep sense of the sin that exists without us and within us, is obviously in a state of death or decay...
36. Eph.2:1—“and you were dead in your trespasses and sins...”—to be “dead in sin” is to be dead to its heinous nature and eternal danger...
37. The healthier our souls, the more sensitive we become to sin—the smallest offense feels like a huge crime...
38. For example, think of two American soldiers—one has a set of thick glasses to protect his eyes from the sand the other does not...
39. While every single grain of sand causes pain and discomfort to one soldier, the other can withstand an entire sandstorm...
40. So too it is with a dead and alive soul—a dead soul can endure all forms of sin with little if any discomfort while a soul that is alive feels the slightest breeze...
41. 1Tim.4:1-2—“now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron...”
42. Notice [3] spiritually dead people are distanced from God—spiritual death can best be defined as separation from God...
43. The apostle described those dead in sin and transgression as—“having no hope and without God in the world...” (Eph.2:12)

44. Octavius Winslow—“When the believer has but a few dealings with Christ—his blood but seldom traveled to—his fulness but little lived upon—his love and glory scarcely mentioned, the symptoms of declension in the soul are obvious...”
45. My friends, this perhaps more than any other thing, is a sure test of our present spiritual health—what are we making of Christ in a practical way...
46. Not simply what is our creed with reference to Christ—but what are we doing with Christ presently and practically...

III. An Exhortation—vv2-3a

1. With these verses our Savior provides no less than a five-fold exhortation—“be watchful, strengthen, remember, hold fast, and repent...”
2. But instead of examining these individually, I want to suggest that they can be divided into two sections— [1] what they were to do (v2), and [2] how they were to do it (v3)...
3. Notice [1] what they were to do, v2—“be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God...”
4. The verb translated “be watchful” means—“to continue in an awakened condition remaining watchful or alert...”
5. It is rendered “wake up” by the NAS—the verb is present active so we could paraphrase it—“wake up and stay awake...”
6. Lenski—“Aroused and thus awake here means wide awake to see the deplorable condition of the dying church. Drowsy, sleepy, sleeping eyes would see nothing and would let the dying go on until it would be too late to interfere...”
7. The verb rendered “strengthen” literally means—“to stabilize something that is weak or unsteady...” –thus our Savior is telling them to arouse themselves from their spiritual indifference...
8. Apparently there was a degree of grace and concern present—not every person was totally dead in the fullest sense...
9. Thus they were to “strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die...”—that is, they were to fan the coals that were about to die...
10. Eph.5:14—“therefore He says: Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light...”
11. Notice [2] how they were to do it, v3a—“remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent...”
12. Perhaps the greatest difficult here is determining what they had previously “received and heard” and that our Savior wants them to remember...
13. The options that have been suggested are three—[a] the holy Spirit, 1Jn.2:27—“the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you...” [b] Christ, Col.2:6—“as you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord...”
14. But most probably our Savior was referring to the gospel, notice carefully His words—“remember therefore how you have received and heard...”
15. Phil.4:9—“the things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you...”
16. 1Thess.2:13—“for this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God...”
17. Thus essential to arousing ourselves from our slumber is a remembrance of the basic truths of the gospel—our sins and Savior...
18. We are to “hold fast” to these things and “repent”—that is, own our sin of spiritual slumber before God and beg Him for mercy...
19. We are to repent from our spiritual deadness and dullness—we are to offer to God a broken and contrite spirit...
20. We are to say with the prodigal son—“I will arise and go to my father and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son...”

21. But you may ask—will the Father receive me back into His household—a dead sinner, a hypocrite, a sleepy saint...
22. Lk. 15:20—“and he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him...”