

The Dead Church  
Revelation 3:1-6  
11/16/2014

Dwight L. Moody once told the following story: “Some years ago a remarkable picture was exhibited in London. As you looked at it from a distance, you seemed to see a monk engaged in prayer, his hands clasped, his head bowed. As you came nearer, however, and examined the painting more closely, you saw that in reality he was squeezing a lemon into a punch bowl!” As we look at our text today, we see that the main sin against which this text speaks is hypocrisy. And, we can also see something of how the Lord intends to fight against hypocrisy in His church, and how He wants us to address the problem, as well.

Sardis was a city with a very colorful history. Aspects of its history are reflected in the language that John uses here. For instance, the main criticism that Jesus has of this church is that it has the appearance of being alive, when it is, in fact, dead, or mostly dead. The city had a history of being invaded, and then “coming back to life.” The city also had a history of believing something that was not true. One of its kings, by name Croesus, once went to the oracle at Delphi and asked whether he should go to war with the king of Persia. The oracle was famous for its cryptic and ambiguous comments. It said, “If Croesus goes to war with Persia, he will destroy a mighty empire.” So, Croesus went to war with Persia and lost everything. The kingdom he had destroyed was his own kingdom! Jesus says, in effect, that the people of the church in Sardis believed that they were alive when they were in fact dead, or sick to the point of death. They were deluded about their own spiritual state, as one commentator puts it. The church was a hypocritical church. Outwardly, it looked alive and well. Inwardly, it was dead.

Now, obviously, the church could be completely and utterly dead, or else there would be no point in Jesus writing a letter to the church. But there was a terrible inner cancer eating away at the Sardis church, and the church didn't even know it. The nature of this cancer is not known to us completely. It at least two elements that we can identify, however. One is indicated by verse 4. Jesus says that there are some who have not soiled their garments. This is almost certainly a reference to idolatry and/or sexual immorality, a theme we have seen in the last two letters. The second element of the cancer

of hypocrisy is found in verse 5. When Jesus promises to confess the names of the faithful before His Father, this brings immediately to mind the saying of Jesus in the gospels that whoever confesses His name before men, Jesus will confess the faithful person's name before the Father. So the second element of the hypocrisy was that the people of Sardis church were not confessing the name of Jesus before the rest of the world. The second element seems to be the more important one, because of verse 2. Jesus tells the church that He does not find their works complete in the sight of God. So the hypocrisy had to do primarily with what they were NOT doing.

In verse 2, combined with verse 3, we see another aspect of the history of Sardis coming into play. Jesus tells the people to wake up in verse 2, and strengthen what is about to die. Then in verse 3, He says that if they do not wake up, then He will come like a thief in the night, and they will not know at what hour Jesus will come. We mentioned before that Sardis had been captured several times in its history. What is important here is the way in which the city was captured. It was captured because the watchmen became lax in their duty. Sardis, you see, has a very easily defend-able position. One side of the city is a sheer cliff that is extremely difficult to climb. However, in the times when it fell, the conqueror knew about this cliff, and also that the watchmen were not watching it, thinking themselves safe. And so the conqueror would come like a thief in the night, and scale the cliffs, and so the city was easily taken after that. The watchmen were not watching, and so the thief in the night took the city. Similarly, the church needed to wake up and keep watch and strengthen what was failing, so that Jesus would not come like an enemy, but would come as a friend.

This leads us to the solution to Sardis' problem. Remember the solution is always given to us in the description of Jesus in the first part of each letter. In this case, the solution is two-fold: firstly, the Holy Spirit's work inside us, and secondly, the providence and sovereignty of God.

Having the seven spirits of God is a description from chapter 1's vision that John had of Jesus Christ. Remember that seven is the number of completeness. So John is not saying that the Holy Spirit is really seven spirits. Rather, John is saying that Jesus has the fullness and completeness of the Holy Spirit, so that He can give it to the church. The Holy Spirit is the largest part of the answer to hypocrisy. You see, the Holy Spirit knows our deepest thoughts and the darkest parts of our hearts. And the Holy Spirit is

the only person who can really cleanse the deep parts of us. The Holy Spirit is the answer to making us on the inside what we appear to be on the outside.

That brings us to the subject of hypocrisy itself. Hypocrisy is a tricky thing, because there are two main kinds of it. Hypocrisy with a capital H is what happens when a person is playing a role that they have no stake in at all. This happens when a person who is not a Christian claims to be a Christian. There are certainly many of these kinds of hypocrites about today, including many in the church, and maybe even some here at Lebanon, who knows? How can we know whether we are this sort of hypocrite or not? Well, we have to go back to the basic questions of the gospel, don't we? Do you believe that Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself to take away the guilt of your sin? And do you believe that He is Lord of your life? Do you believe that the Holy Spirit has made you alive, who were once dead in your trespasses and sins? Have you given the throne of your life to Jesus Christ? If you can say yes to these questions, then you are not a hypocrite with a capital H.

There are some additional diagnostic questions that it is healthy to ask ourselves. What is our basic attitude towards the Word of God? Yes, there may be occasions where our sinful nature says that we don't really want to hear the Word right now. But what is your general attitude towards the Word? Are you wanting more of it? And are you wanting to understand it more? The Hypocrite with a capital H never wants that. He especially doesn't like it when the Word challenges him to change in some way. Another question we can ask is this: are we growing? There will be valleys and mountains both in the growth of a Christian, but the trend line is always in an upward direction. Have you seen growth? Do you see more Christlikeness over time?

These questions can help us to determine whether we are hypocrites with a capital H or not. The good news for such hypocrites is that there is always hope. For the Holy Spirit can turn a hypocrite into a genuine believer.

But there is a second definition of hypocrite, a less strict definition. The less strict definition is someone who looks better on the outside than they look on the inside. Of course, by that definition, every single Christian in the world and throughout history is a hypocrite. There is great confusion between these two definitions in the minds of most unbelievers when they accuse the church of being nothing but a bunch of hypocrites. What they

think they mean is that the church is full of lots of people who claim to be Christians when they are not, because their behavior doesn't match up with their profession. But do you see the problem? A hypocrite with a capital H usually has very excellent outward behavior. Many times you cannot even tell whether they are faking it or not. That's not what most unbelievers are talking about, though. They are usually talking about Christians whose behavior does not match up to their profession. In other words, outwardly, they don't look so good. They don't do what they believe. They don't practice what they preach. But that is a very different problem from the hypocrisy with a capital H. You see, all Christians are still sinners. This is what the unbeliever does not usually understand. They think that unless Christians are perfect, then Christianity must not be true. And yet, when it comes to themselves, they will be the first ones to cry out that no one is perfect! Being a Christian in this life is the beginning of a journey that takes us where we were, and changes us gradually over time to be like Jesus. That is a lifelong process. It is an uneven process. It goes in fits and starts. It is more evident in some people than in others.

We mentioned before that there are two solutions to the problem at Sardis. The first solution is the power of the Holy Spirit. That is what changes us from being hypocrites with a capital H to being genuine believers. The Holy Spirit also helps us in our less strict kind of hypocrisy by gradually changing us over time. None of what we have said so far is meant to deny that we must exercise effort on our part. Look at the commands that Jesus gives. Verse 2 says to wake up and strengthen. Verse 3 says to remember, keep what is remembered, and repent. Just because it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to do these things does not mean that we can therefore merely let go and let God.

The second solution to the problem at Sardis is the providence of God. Jesus is described as having the seven stars in His hand. He said the same thing in the first letter, the one addressed to Ephesus. The providence of God helps on the flip side of the problems just mentioned. You see, it would be easy, having heard all this, to be terrified of losing one's salvation. The soul that is terrified of being a hypocrite will often lash itself with cruel whips and be in a torment of agony trying to find out whether he or she is a hypocrite or not. But the One Who holds the stars holds us as well in the palm of His hand. The warnings in Scripture are intended to prevent Jesus'

losing us. And they are effective in that way for the elect, as the entire Scripture is effective in accomplishing God's purpose. Here are some bracing words for us. Just because we struggle with sin doesn't make us a hypocrite, since every Christian in all history has had to struggle with sin. Here in Revelation 3, Jesus encourages us with words about the book of life. Here God's sovereignty has its most comforting words. They come in the form of a three-fold promise.

The first promise is that those who conquer will walk with Jesus in white. Their garments that were stained will be changed out for pure white raiment, always a sign in the Bible of purity and holiness. The only way they can be dressed in white is for Jesus to give them those clothes. Here we remember Zechariah 3, and the story of the high priest's dirty clothes being changed, by grace, for clean white clothes. It is a picture of justification. The result of justification is walking with Jesus.

The second promise is that their names will never be blotted out of the book of life. Now here the Arminian will object to our interpretation. They usually think that the mere mention of blotting someone's name out of the book implies that it could happen. This is not true. The other times this book is mentioned in Revelation, it is quite plain that the names are written in the book since before time even began. Nothing will change that. So what it means here is not that it could happen and that Jesus will prevent it. Rather it simply means that their names will stay in that book.

The third promise is that Jesus will confess the conqueror's name before the Father and before the angels. Those who confess the name of Christ are the people that Jesus will confess before the Father that He knows them and that they are His. When we hear our names on the lips of Jesus, it will be in one of two ways. The first is that Jesus will say to the unbelievers that He never them, and that they should depart. The other way is that Jesus claims God's children to be His bride. Which way do you want Jesus to talk about your name?