

Christ's Message to the Seven Churches

Christ's Message to Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

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November 6, 2016

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Scripture

We are currently in a series of messages titled, "Christ's Message to the Seven Churches," that is based on the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

In Revelation 1 the resurrected and glorified Christ revealed himself to his Apostle John, and told him to write letters to seven churches in Asia. Today, we shall examine the fifth of those letters, and learn about Christ's message to his church in Sardis.

Let's read Christ's message to Sardis in Revelation 3:1-6:

¹ "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

" 'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. ⁴ Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' " (Revelation 3:1-6)

Introduction

Dr. John MacArthur gave the following illustration:

The vast distances of interstellar space are unimaginably immense. The nearest stars to us are trillions of miles away. Those large distances have forced astronomers to come up with an appropriate measurement unit, the light-year. One light-year equals the distance that light, traveling at more than 186,000 miles per second, travels in one year – more than 6 trillion miles.

The enormous distance to even the nearest stars presents an interesting possibility. If a star thirty light-years away from the earth exploded and died five years ago, we would not be able to tell by looking at it for another twenty-five years. Though no longer in existence, the light from that star would go on shining as if nothing had changed.

That illustration perfectly sums up the situation in many churches. They still shine with the reflected light of a brilliant past. Looking at them from a distance, one might think nothing had changed. Yet the spiritual darkness of false teaching and sinful living has extinguished the light on the inside, though some of their reputation may still remain.¹

Christ's assessment of the church in Sardis was that it had a reputation for being alive, but was in fact dead. Every Christian church ought to take a careful look at the church in Sardis to learn what caused the Lord Jesus Christ to make such an assessment.

Lesson

The analysis of Christ's message to Sardis as set forth in Revelation 3:1-6 teaches us that a church may be orthodox but dead.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Address (3:1a)
2. The Description (3:1b)
3. The Complaint (3:1c, 2b)
4. The Command (3:2a, 3a)

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 107-108.

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5. The Warning (3:3b)
6. The Commendation (3:4)
7. The Promise (3:5)
8. The Appeal (3:6)

I. The Address (3:1a)

First, let's look at the address.

Christ said in verse 1a, **“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write. . . .”** The letter was addressed to **the angel**, which also means “messenger.” In context of the letters, I take it to mean that each letter was addressed to the pastor of the church.

John Stott describes the city of Sardis as follows:

The town of Sardis lay about 30 miles south-east of Thyatira and 50 miles due east of Smyrna. Situated at the foot of Mount Tmolus and in the fertile valley of the River Hermus, it was also the converging point of several inland roads, so that it had become a busy center of trade and traffic. But its ancient history was more distinguished still. The capital of the old kingdom of Lydia, it was here that the fabulous King Croesus reigned amid his treasures until it fell to the swift attack of the Persian conqueror Cyrus.

Later in its history, Sardis had the distinction of being captured by both Alexander the Great and Antiochus the Great. But it gradually fell on evil days and lost its earlier renown, until in A.D. 17 it was devastated by an earthquake. Through the generosity of the Emperor Tiberius, who remitted its taxes for five years, the city was rebuilt, and flourished again to the extent that the ancient historian Strabo could call it “a great city,” though it never regained its former glory.

Nothing is known of the origins of the church in Sardis, nor of its early growth, except what may be gathered from this letter.²

² John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 81-82.

II. The Description (3:1b)

Second, notice the description.

Christ described himself in verse 1b, **“The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.”** As in his description of himself to the previous churches, Christ’s description of himself comes from chapter 1. In Revelation 1:4 we said that the **“seven spirits”** was a reference to the Holy Spirit. And in Revelation 1:16 and 1:20a we said that the **“seven stars”** was a reference to the pastors. In other words, Christ was asserting that his message to the seven pastors of the seven churches came from him and through the Holy Spirit. Christ is in sovereign control of his churches, and he exercises his rule through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the pastors of each local church.

John MacArthur notes:

Christ’s introduction of Himself does not hint at the severity of the situation in Sardis. Surprisingly, He did not introduce Himself as the divine Judge (as He did in 2:18 to the church at Thyatira), although the church at Sardis faced imminent judgment. Instead, He depicted Himself as the One who sovereignly works in His church through the Holy Spirit and godly leaders. That introduction served as a reminder to the Sardis church of what they lacked.³

III. The Complaint (3:1c, 2b)

Third, observe the complaint.

Christ said in verse 1c, **“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”** What a jaw-dropping assessment! John Stott writes:

Only a few simple words were needed by which to expose

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 109.

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this church's spiritual bankruptcy, but they were as devastating as the earthquake of A.D. 17. . . . The church of Sardis had acquired a name. Its reputation as a progressive church had evidently spread far and wide. It was well regarded in the city and in the neighborhood. It was known by the other six churches in the province for its vitality. No false doctrine was taking root in its fellowship. We hear of neither Balaam, nor Nicolaitans, nor Jezebel. "What a live church you have in Sardis!" visitors would exclaim with admiration when they attended its services or watched its activities; and so no doubt it appeared. Its congregation was probably quite large for those days, and growing, while its program doubtless included many excellent projects. It had no shortage of money, talent, or human resources. There was every indication of life and vigor.⁴

Christ went on to say in verse 2b, **"... for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God."** The church in Sardis was active with many **works** but they were not found to be **complete**, that is, they did not fulfill God's purpose. The church looked good to everyone in the community, but from God's perspective the church was in serious trouble.

John MacArthur asks the question that every church should ask itself, "What are the danger signs that a church is dying?" He answers the question as follows:

A church is in danger when it is content to rest on its past laurels, when it is more concerned with liturgical forms than spiritual reality, when it focuses on curing social ills rather than changing people's hearts through preaching the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ, when it is more concerned with material than spiritual things, when it is more concerned with what men think than what God said, when it is more enamored with doctrinal creeds and systems of theology than with the Word of God, or when it loses its conviction that every word of the Bible is the word of God

⁴ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 82-83.

Himself. No matter what its attendance, no matter how impressive its buildings, no matter what its status in the community, such a church, having denied the only source of spiritual life, is dead.⁵

IV. The Command (3:2a, 3a)

Fourth, look at the command.

There were a faithful few in the church at Sardis, as we shall in verse 4. Christ gave the faithful few five commands that were needed by the church in Sardis, if they were to survive and thrive.

*First, the church in Sardis needed to **wake up** (2a).* The faithful few in the church in Sardis needed to pay attention to what was going on. Things in the church were in a dreadful condition, and, as John MacArthur said, they needed “to look at what was happening in their church, evaluate the situation, get involved in changing things, confront sin and error, and make a difference.”⁶

*Second, the church in Sardis needed to **strengthen what remained and was about to die** (2a).* The faithful few were to get active in the church and nurture and disciple those who were not doing well spiritually.

*Third, the church in Sardis needed to **remember, then, what** they had **received and heard** (3:3a).* The people of God in the church had **received and heard** the Word of God. In that word they had learned about Christ and the gospel, which they had embraced. They had learned the elementary truths of discipleship. The faithful few needed to go back to the Word of God and its doctrine to serve as a foundation for recovery and renewal.

*Fourth, the church in Sardis needed to **keep it** (3:3a).* That is, they needed to obey the Word of God. Sound doctrine is necessary for sound practice. But if there is no sound practice, the sound doctrine is worthless. God’s people must obey his Word.

*And fifth, the church in Sardis needed to **repent** (3:3a).* The church

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 111-112.

⁶ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 114.

in Sardis needed to ask God's forgiveness, and turn from its dead orthodoxy.

These five steps were necessary for the church in Sardis to come back to life again. And, these five steps are necessary for any church that is orthodox but dead to experience renewal and revival.

V. The Warning (3:3b)

Fifth, notice the warning.

Christ said in verse 3b, **"If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."** No one knows when a thief will come and rob a person. It is completely unexpected. And that is the picture Christ wanted the church in Sardis to know.

Christ was also not referring to his Second Coming. Rather, he was referring to his imminent coming to judge his dying church.

Christ will judge faithless churches. He has done so in history, and he does so today. Every church in every age and in every place must remain faithful to Christ. Otherwise, he will judge it.

VI. The Commendation (3:4)

Sixth, observe the commendation.

As mentioned earlier, there were a faithful few in the church in Sardis. Christ said in verse 4, **"Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy."** John MacArthur said, "God had His remnant even in the dead church at Sardis. There were a few sincere among the hypocrites, a few humble among the proud, a few separated among the worldly, and a few stalks of wheat among the tares."⁷

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 113.

The **garments** that are **white** could refer garments that were worn for festivals and celebrations. Or, in contrast to those unbelievers whose garments **soiled**, Christ would give them white garments, which symbolized his purity.

VII. The Promise (3:5)

Seventh, look at the promise.

Actually, Christ promised three things to those who remained faithful, to **the one who conquers** (3:5).

First, Christ promised that the one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments (3:5a). Again, **white garments** are promised to those who remain faithful to Christ. The **white garments** symbolize purity. And they are also the garments that will be worn by all believers at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Revelation 19:7-8 says, “‘Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure’— for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.”

Second, Christ promised that he will never blot his name out of the book of life (3:5b). There is a **book of life** in heaven, and all true believers have their name written in that book. Christ promised that it will never be erased, and that is the hope and security of every true Christian that enables him or her to persevere in the Lord.

And third, Christ promised that he will confess his name before his Father and before his angels (3:5c). Christ had made this promise during his earthly ministry. He said in Matthew 10:32, “So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.” Christ affirmed in the strongest way that he will present all believers to his Father.

VIII. The Appeal (3:6)

And eighth, notice the appeal.

Christ said in verse 6, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** Christ appealed to Christians to pay attention to what he said to them through the Spirit.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Christ's message to Sardis as set forth in Revelation 3:1-6, we should examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith.

When I was a student at seminary, I came to the end of the semester and was about to take a Greek exam, along with about twenty fellow classmates. We were all rather nervous, wondering if we had learned enough to pass the exam. As was his custom, our instructor read a passage of Scripture to us and opened the class with prayer. I will never forget the passage of Scripture he read to us. It was 2 Corinthians 13:5-6 (*NIV*), “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.” We all laughed, the nervous tension was broken, we wrote the test, and we did not fail. Of course, that was not the right application of the passage of Scripture.

The correct application of the Scripture, however, is exactly what Christ wanted his church in Sardis to do. They were to examine themselves to see if they were in the faith. They were to see themselves as orthodox but dead, and were to repent and turn back to Christ.

We might ask, “What happened to Sardis?” John MacArthur answers:

Did they heed the warning? Did revival come? That such a

prominent man as Melito served as bishop of Sardis several decades after John wrote argues that at least some revival took place in Sardis. Until Christ returns, it is not too late for other dead churches to find the path to spiritual renewal.⁸

May God help us to examine ourselves individually and also as a church so that we may not be found to be orthodox but dead. May we not fail the test, but be found to have a real, vibrant, vital, active faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁸ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, 116.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for Christ's message to the church in Sardis. The church in Sardis was a church that was orthodox but dead. Christ commanded them to wake up, strengthen what remained, remember, obey, and repent.

O God, help us to examine ourselves to see if we might be orthodox but dead. And, if we are, enable us to wake up, strengthen what remains, remember, obey, and repent so that we might experience renewal and revival.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!