

A Tale of Seven Churches: Sardis Revelation 3:1-6

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Located about 50 miles south of Thyatira, overlooking the Hermus Valley, the city of Sardis was once one of the richest and most powerful cities in the known world.

700 years before this letter was written Sardis was unsurpassed as a commercial and cultural center. Think about that. This letter was written 2000 years ago and at that point the city had already been around for 700 years.

Situated at the junction of five main trading routes, Sardis was a major commercial center. It was a rich city that didn't have to do much to achieve its prosperity. It was this sense of ease and apathy that eventually led to its downfall.

The city was located on the top of a hill that was so steep that its defenses seemed impregnable.

But twice, once in 549BC and again 300 years later it's enemy scaled the steep cliffs to discover that the Sardians were so confident they hadn't even posted a guard.

In fact, the first conqueror, Cyrus of Persia, insured that there would be no rebellion or uprising in the city by requiring three actions by its citizens.

First, he ruled that no one be allowed to possess a weapon. Then he prohibited all citizens from wearing sandals. They had to wear a soft, slipper type footwear favored by actors.

Finally, he ordered that all the boys of Sardis be instructed in music, song, and dance. The result was the city lost its spirit.

Sardis was known for two things. First, the process for dyeing wool was first discovered here. Second, it was known for its worship of the goddess Artemis.

Even though the worship of Artemis was widespread, there's no indication that there was any persecution of the church from its priests.

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By the time John wrote this letter, the city was wealthy, but soft and degenerate, and the church was the same.

There's no evidence to suspect that there was any heresy or persecution in this congregation. There was no threat from inside or outside the church.

One commentator remarked that the reason the church in Sardis was left alone was that it lacked aggressive and positive Christianity.

Content with mediocrity, it lacked both... the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance. It was just too innocuous to be worthy of persecution.

So, sheltered and unthreatened, the church in Sardis gradually wilted until there was no substance to it. In fact, Jesus even said, "*You have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead!*"

Prophetically we're told that this church represents the period between 1500AD and 1700AD.

If you know much about church history, 1517 is the year a 30-year-old monk by the name of Martin Luther challenged the Roman Catholic Church and began what we know as the Reformation.

Thus, the beginning of the Sardis era in church history coincides with the birth of the Protestant Church.

The Reformation may have been marked with proper theology, but the works and service that make love and faith practical was missing from the early protestant church.

We must remember that although the Reformation was a divine movement, inspired by the God and directed by the Holy Spirit, the resulting institutions were man made and, as such, were flawed.

So, the question is not simply: *“How did this scripture relate 20 centuries ago?”* But, *“What does it have to say to us today in 2020?”*

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Again, Revelation 3 begins with that frightening Revelation by Christ *“I know your deeds.”* Or in this case, all the things you don't do.

We must understand that the local church today will be examined to see what it accomplished while on this earth.

What we do, why we do it, and how it's done will all be taken into consideration by the risen Christ.

To claim that works and deeds and service are unnecessary under the New Testament is to use grace and faith as an excuse to do nothing and that's the ultimate heresy.

Matthew 25:31-46, tells of Jesus' second coming where He separates the goats from the sheep. Listen to the criteria used for the division. To one group He says:

Matthew 25:35-36, *“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger*

and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Now, listen to what He says to the other group. Matthew 25:42-23, *“For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.”*

It's assumed that because both groups addressed Christ as Lord that there were equal expectations. But salvation is not a reward for the good things we've done.

The change that Christ makes in our hearts ultimately manifests itself in an expression of love most often identified with good works.

Good works will not save you. You will never be good enough, do enough or give enough to get into heaven.

However, it's the mystery of salvation that the things which do save you, namely grace and faith, ultimately produce the things that won't save you, namely works and service.

Therefore, on the basis of that one statement which proceeds each of the seven letters, *“I know what you do,”* we need to ask ourselves as a church, what is it we do?

If Christ were to write to Grace Fellowship Baptist Church and begin His letter with the words *“I know what you do,”* what would He identify as positive qualities or negative qualities within our congregation.

Could we, as a Christian church, a body of believers, be judged on the merits of our works if we had to be? Have we given food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked?

Have we sheltered the homeless and visited those who were sick and in prison? If not, I wonder... will we end up with the sheep or the goats?

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Jesus goes on in Revelation 3:1 to say, *“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive.”*

In 2020, if I asked you what churches were alive what would your response be? I hope the Baptist church would be there.

The truth is that, if you were asked that question, you'd probably have thought of evangelical or charismatic churches.

Within the Evangelical community, the Baptist Church does has a reputation for being alive. And there's nothing wrong with having that type of reputation.

The church in Sardis also had a heritage behind them; they had been a powerful witness in their community and as such had acquired a reputation for being alive.

The churches of the Reformation that made a clean break with the church of Rome we known for being alive. The Baptist church has a history and reputation that says, *“The Baptist Church is Alive!”*

And yet, the truth of the matter is, no matter how great our reputation or how wonderful our name as a denomination is, each individual church has a responsibility to prove itself.

In other words, *“If you are going to stay alive then you have to stay alive.”*

Every day people arrive at funeral homes who had a reputation for being alive, but that doesn't help them now because they're dead, and dead is dead.

Jesus went on to say the same when He said, *"I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."* Remember, after the "But" comes... that's right the truth.

In my last message I talked about the implications of the words "nevertheless" and "however."

The word "but" fits into the same category. When something complimentary has been said and it's followed by the word "but" don't expect any more compliments.

If someone says, *"You have lovely blue eyes... but."* You can expect them to continue by saying, *"Your nose is too big, or your hair is too thin, or your lips are too full."*

So, after the but comes the truth, *"you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."* That has to hurt.

Jesus is saying, *"In case of a discrepancy between reputation and reality, reality will be considered correct."* Last year's reputation is worthless if it doesn't measure up to today's reality.

Robert Schuman said, *"There are two very difficult things in the world. One is to make a name for oneself and the other is to keep it."*

The church in Sardis had had an excellent name at one time. A name for being alive but Jesus says, *"I know better, I know that you are dead."*

Not sick, not injured, not crippled, not faint, not weak but dead, and dead is dead.

When we talk about a dead church, what do we mean? Well, you know Pastor, dead.

The music is slow and dreary, the preacher is slow and dreary, in fact the entire worship service is slow and dreary. You know dead.

Then you might say, *“You know. Like such and such church.”* But that type of definition of dead is personal and subjective. What’s dead to you may or may not be dead to me.

And while we may define such and such a church as dead and slow and dreary, there might be some people who look at Grace Fellowship and think the same.

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So, what makes a church dead. Let me give you three characteristics that, if present in a person or a church, probably indicates death.

First, you’re dead if you lack compassion. There are no feelings in a dead person, no joy or sorrow, no happiness or anger, nothing. We could say that a dead person is apathetic.

Now, sometimes we feel blue and depressed and say, *“I don’t care about anything.”* The reality is that we probably care too much about everything. The dead person on the other hand just plain doesn’t care. And a dead church doesn’t care.

They don’t care about a person’s physical wellness; there’s no compassion. It goes back to what Christ said about being hungry, thirsty, naked, and sick... nobody cared! That’s indicative of death.

Jesus’ brother James talked about the same thing in James 2:15-17, *“Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food.*

If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

So, it isn't enough just to have faith. Faith that doesn't show itself by good deeds is no faith at all—it's dead and useless. A church that's dead doesn't care.

It doesn't care about people's physical needs and it doesn't care about people's spiritual needs.

When a church is dead there's no interest in outreach or evangelism. They may give all kinds of reasons why they're not, but the bottom line is they just don't care.

Second, if you're dead if you lack warmth. I don't mean you're just a little cool. Susen's body temperature normally runs below what's considered normal. So, when she takes her temperature; it's normal but it's not.

She's not dead just cool. However, if instead of 97.6 degrees it was 77.6, she'd definitely have a problem.

In the same way, a church might be a little cool which may just be the personality of that church. Not every church is into hugging and gushing. But when there is no warmth or love at all then the church is dead.

When people visit our church, do they find it a warm and welcoming place? I don't mean temperature wise. Do we make people feel welcome and cared for?

I've visited churches where no one bothered to speak to me. I felt like an intruder. That isn't a little cool, that's cold.

And finally, you're dead if you lack movement. Have you ever noticed that about dead people; they don't move.

Have you ever gone to a funeral home for a viewing, and heard someone say, *"They look so life like?"* No, they don't! They aren't moving!

Dead people don't move, and dead churches don't move. They may offer up a lot of excuses about why they don't move like: *"We've never done it that way before"* or *"We're a traditional church"* or *"We tried it once and it didn't work"* or *"The last pastor didn't do it that way."*

The truth of the matter is, if you aren't moving ahead and growing then something's wrong. What worked 100 years ago, or 20 years ago or 10 years ago or even last year won't necessarily work this year.

Businesses that refuse to change, update and modernize eventually fail. And churches that refuse to change, update and modernize eventually die.

Don't misunderstand me, I don't mean we change the message. The Word of God is timeless and applies equally today as it did when it was written. But the way we deliver it needs to change if we're to reach today's generation.

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Conclusion

When people are dead, I mean really dead they usually stay that way. It's the same, unfortunately, for churches. But it doesn't have to be that way. Jesus tells the church in Sardis to do three things.

First, He tells them to wake up. One of the first things that Christ told that church was to look around at where they were.

In the myriad of 12 step programs that exist today, the first step is always the same, wake up and admit you have a problem. The first step for the dying church is to wake up and admit that things need to change.

I'm pretty sure that up to this point most people in the church at Sardis would have thought that everything was going just fine, after all there was no persecution happening and no heresies.

But, Jesus is telling them to wake up! Look around! See how far you've fallen!

The second thing Jesus tells them to do is to strengthen what little remains. Obviously, the church wasn't a complete loss.

We don't know what remained, but Jesus was basically telling them to build on their strengths.

There may not have been much, but there was obviously something worth hanging on to. Jesus wasn't telling them everything had to go.

In our spiritual lives and in the life of our church sometimes we need to go back to the basics and focus on those things we do well.

Which leads us to step 3. Jesus tells them to go back to what they first heard and believed. Go back to where you started.

He's telling them to remember the time when things were new and fresh and exciting? How their faith was when they first became a Christian? How exciting things were when the church was still young?

People say you can't go back, but sometimes you must before you can go ahead.

So where are you at today? Where are we, as a church, today? If Jesus was to look down and write a letter to Grace Fellowship, what would He be telling us?

Not only as individuals, but as a church? Would we get a compliment or a complaint? Remember, He knows our deeds!