

The Church in Sardis
Revelation 3:1-6

Slide 1

How do you know when a person is dead? Now, this isn't a trick question. Usually, we determine whether or not there's a heartbeat or whether or not there is a pulse.

We could also hold a mirror above their mouth to see if they're breathing, or if you're in a hospital they could check for brain waves.

But how do you determine when an organization is dead? That's a more difficult and daunting challenge.

With regard to today's passage, how do we specifically know when a church is dead, even though by all appearance it seems alive and well.

The easiest answer would be if it was a church with declining attendance. A church where the numbers are shrinking to the point that a for sale sign goes out in front, or the windows get boarded up.

But I think the deeper question goes to issues of spiritual vitality. Is a church that has been torn by controversy for years on end truly a living church?

Or what about a church that's so comfortable in its current situation that there's no place for new people?

What about a church that has completely lost its vision to reach people for Christ? If a church has no passion for those who don't know Jesus, can it truly be called a "living" church?

Have you ever driven by a church and wondered, *"I wonder if this church is alive or dead?"*

Have you ever wondered that about Grace Fellowship? This is one of those questions which is easier to ask than answer.

After all, if the church has a worship service, a Sunday School, small groups, and a praise team, does that mean it's alive? Or can a seemingly alive church really be dead?

Again, these are questions that are easier to ask than to answer. The only One who can really answer this is Jesus.

This was the problem facing the church in Sardis. As we look at the fifth of seven churches in Revelation, Jesus makes a very harsh diagnosis, *"You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."*

When you think about the different comments that Jesus could make about a church, this may very well be the worse thing a church could have said about it.

We can assume from His comment about this church in Sardis, *"You have a reputation of being alive,"* that:

- The church seemed alive and well.
- It had a good reputation in the community.
- It was evidently not on the brink of closing its doors.
- Others spoke well of the church.

Maybe they hosted a yearly missions' conference; or the pastor wrote books and traveled throughout Asia Minor.

Maybe they had a large congregation, or maybe they just bought a new building, etc. All we know is that appearances can be deceiving.

Unlike the earlier letters we've looked at, Jesus doesn't mention the fact that:

- The church isn't suffering from persecution.
- There isn't a concern with false doctrine.
- There is no idol worship going on.
- There is no hint of sexual immorality.
- The church isn't warned about losing its first love.

We really don't know what was wrong in this church. All we know about Sardis is that things looked good on the outside, but they were dying on the inside.

Slide 2

On our map, we see that Sardis is located just a few miles south of Thyatira.

Slide 3

Many years earlier, Sardis had been one of the most important cities of Asia Minor. When Persia controlled the region, Sardis was actually the capital city.

It was famed for its affluence. Golden and silver minted coinage had its origin there, and the Pactolus River, which flowed nearby, was known for its easily mined alluvial gold.

In fact, this is where mythology introduces us to Midas who was given the gift of a golden touch, but when he found that even the food he touched turned to gold he requested to be relieved of his gift.

To reverse this cursed gift, he was told to bathe in the Pactolus River that flows near Sardis. It was this action that the people in the region attribute the presence of alluvial gold.

But when this letter was written, Sardis's best days had come and gone. They were living off their reputation of past glory and under Roman control, it faded into insignificance.

Slide 4

Sardis was a town living in the past and on the past. It seems that the church of Sardis had taken on the character of the city itself.

One writer called the church at Sardis *“the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity.”*

Evidently the Jews and the Romans didn't bother the church because the church didn't bother them.

It was left alone because it lacked the conviction to stir the waters and make waves. That's a serious slap in the face.

Although apparently active on the outside, on the inside it had become a *“spiritual graveyard.”* Jesus made this diagnosis because He could read the hearts and minds of those who worshiped there.

Maybe that's why He's called the one who *“holds the seven spirits of God,”* a reference to the Holy Spirit Who sees all things and Who searches every heart.

Nothing is hidden from Him. Jesus spoke about this in Matthew 23:

Matthew 23:27-28, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? We like to cover up the dirt and make it look good on the outside. We like to dress well and smile, all the while on the inside our hearts are breaking.

How does a situation develop where a church with a good reputation turns out to be spiritually dead? Let me list a few indicators:

- When the past becomes more important than the present.
- When keeping a good reputation matters more than a bold witness for Christ.
- When religious ritual becomes an end in itself.
- When talking about Christ matters more than knowing Christ.
- When convenience trumps sacrifice.
- When appearance matters more than reality.
- When tradition stifles every attempt at innovation.
- When personal comfort outweighs risky faith.

You see, all of these are a matter of the heart. Their doctrine was fine, but too many times a church that's dead will still seem like it's alive. So, how did this happen?

G. Campbell Morgan said, *“The church had come to the place where it lived before men rather than before God, more anxious in all probability about their reputation in Sardis than their reputation in heaven.”*

Slide 5

What, then, is the hope for a spiritually dead congregation? In verse 2, Jesus tells the church to *“Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.”*

Because Sardis was located on a plateau, it seemed secure from invasion.

But twice in its history, while the people were sleeping, invading armies had scaled the heights during the night and captured the city.

So, Christ's warning to "*Wake up!*" had special meaning to the church. Most likely the church had become lazy. If all's going well, why bother to post a guard on the walls?

In 1 Peter 5:8, Peter reminded the church to "*Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*"

We think we're attacked at our point of weakness, but often times we're attacked where we think we're strong and impregnable.

If the devil can't make a frontal attack, he'll send in wolves in sheep's clothing; he'll cause the sheep to begin biting each other, or he'll simply lull the flock to sleep, then pounce on them with deadly force.

Next, Jesus tells the church, in verse 3, "*Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*"

This is the fourth time in these letters that Jesus has called for the church to repent. This is a common theme.

We've been over it, but remember, to repent literally means to change and turn away from what you were doing. Do a 180 degree turn back to the Lord with your whole heart.

I would agree with some authors I've read, "*Nothing is more difficult than for a comfortable church to repent.*"

Most of us don't change unless real pain is involved. We don't pray until we're desperate.

We don't seek God's face until we're in trouble. We don't repent unless we're caught, or we think there's no other hope.

Some people believe that repentance only occurs when you first believe in Jesus. But we need repentance on a daily basis. We think we're fine, but we're worse off than we think we are.

We need to come to God and thank Him for His grace and mercy. Remember grace is receiving something you don't deserve, and mercy is not receiving what you deserve.

We'll never get better and find healing unless we repent; our churches will never have wholeness unless we repent.

You see, God is telling us there are consequences if we don't turn, if we don't wake up to His call to obey Him and repent.

Slide 6

Again, the people of Sardis would have understood God's point. Remember, they slept while their city was being overtaken.

So, God is telling them that if they don't change, He will come like a thief in the night.

There's no worse feeling than to have someone break into your home and take your belongings. We're angry, we're helpless.

Jesus is telling the people to wake up and serve Him, otherwise if they continue as they have, when they finally wake up, it will be because they are face to face with the thief.

So, what can be done? Well, we get some good news in verse 4a, *"Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes."*

There were still people in Sardis who loved and served the Lord with a pure heart. They weren't like those whitewashed tombs.

They were pure on the inside, in their heart. So, God gives a three-fold promise to the overcomers at Sardis:

First, they will be dressed in the white robes of victory. Revelation 3:4b-5a, *“They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white.”*

The white robes are signs of purity and victory that comes when we hold onto Christ.

Second, they will have their names reserved in heaven. Revelation 3:5b, *“I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life.”* This is a statement of absolute assurance of salvation.

The Greek form here is a double negative which really means, *“I will never, ever, under any circumstances blot their names from the book of life. Those whom God saves He saves forever.”*

Third, they will be personally recognized by Jesus. Verse 5c, *“But will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.”*

It’s a wonderful thing to be remembered by your friends. Isn’t it great when we see friends we haven’t seen in years. We hug them and hold them. So, it will be when we stand before the Lord.

No one will say, *“There’s Oscar. I wonder why he’s here.”* No, it’s not like that at all.

Jesus Himself will say, *“Oscar’s my friend. Come on over here!”*
There’s no greater reward than to be personally known and recognized by Jesus.

Slide 7

Conclusion

As we come to the end of this message, we should ask once again, where did the church at Sardis go wrong?

It was a church of the living dead. The church was a bastion of dead orthodoxy and a beehive of religious mediocrity.

Its spiritual condition was made worse by the fact that it seemed on the surface to be spiritually alive.

In that sense it was in greater peril than the persecuted church of Smyrna or the morally compromised churches of Pergamum and Thyatira. It was even in worse condition than the loveless church at Ephesus.

Far worse than persecution from without is dry rot within. The church was lethargic because the people were lethargic.

That can happen to any of us at any time. It can even happen while we're consistently attending church.

We are the church, all of us together, and each of us individually. Perhaps Jesus is speaking to you and to me; maybe this is a message for Grace Fellowship and Jesus is commanding us to "Wake up!" "Shape up!" "Repent!"

The Sardis spirit overtakes us whenever we begin to take God's gifts for granted. How quickly we can become the Church of the Living Dead and not even know it.

Some of us should ask ourselves, "*Do I really know the Lord at all?*" It would be better to be an out-and-out pagan than to go through life as a "cultural Christian" not really knowing God.

At least the pagan knows he is a pagan, but the cultural Christian thinks he's alive when in reality he's dead.

God still loved the church at Sardis. How can I say this? If Jesus didn't care, He wouldn't have written this letter.

So, wherever we are spiritually, we can say, *"Lord, start with me. Do your work in me. Wake me up! Stir me up to love you and to serve you so that the world will know that I belong to you."*

May God wake us up and deliver us from the Church of the Living Dead so that we become the Church of the Living Christ.