

Several years ago, I traveled for a year with a group known as the "Swordbearers" from Cedarville College. We ministered in churches on the weekends, and stayed in the homes of various church members. One of the fellows in the group, Barry, had a good sense of humor which he put to use one particular weekend. I happened to be staying with Barry and another fellow in a home. Barry had gone to the bedroom before we had. When we opened the door, there he was, lying in the middle of the bed, his eyes closed, his facial expression somber, his arms folded with a bouquet of flowers in his hands. He didn't move, and didn't even breathe. We stared at him, finally saw a faint smile on his face, and then watched him erupt in laughter.

Sometimes looks can be deceiving. Barry looked like he was dead, but he was indeed quite alive! The opposite was true of the church in Sardis. Here was a church that had a reputation for being alive, but in reality the church was dead. To the unaided eye and casual glance, the church was quite impressive. But in the assessment of the all-knowing Lord, the church at Sardis was dead.

How does a church die? There are many ways. One is by living in the past. Vance Havner observed that spiritual ministries often go through four stages: a man, a movement, a machine, and then a monument (Wiersbe, 576). Sardis was at the "monument" stage. But no matter how it happens, a dead church is a tragic sight to behold.

Years ago, while growing up, my family attended such a church. No doubt there were good people there, some of which genuinely knew the Lord. In fact, the place was quite impressive. They had a huge building and lots of people. They had Sunday School classes and VBS in the summer. They had elaborate worship services with professionally-voiced music specials, and with the congregation singing the ancient songs of the faith. All in all, the church was impressive. And spiritually dead.

How can you tell if a church is dead? More importantly, what does a church need to do if it is dead on the inside? Let's bring the issue a little closer to home. Churches grow cold when the people that make up the church grow cold. Is your Christian experience vivacious and meaningful, or is it a dull routine? What do we need to do as individuals if we are barren on the inside?

**Proposition: According to Jesus' words in Revelation 3:1-6, if we are a barren church (or a barren Christian), we need to grasp three issues.**

I. Issue #1: We are in danger (1).

A. We know the truth about Jesus.

B. Jesus knows the truth about us.

1. He knows what others do not know.

2. He knows when we substitute activity for intimacy.

II. Issue #2: We need deliverance (2-3).

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\*\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

- A. Admit we need to change (2-3a).
    - 1. Wake up.
    - 2. Strengthen.
    - 3. Remember.
    - 4. Hold on.
    - 5. Repent.
  - B. Be aware of the consequences if we don't (3b).
- III. Issue #3: We must make a decision (4-6).
- A. The remnant is our model (4).
    - 1. A few were pure.
    - 2. A few were worthy.
    - 3. A few will walk with Him.
  - B. The reward is our motivation (5-6).

Implications: What must we do?

- 1. Make sure we know Christ.
- 2. Make sure we are growing in Christ.

### **I. Issue #1: We are in danger (1).**

This morning we come to the fifth of seven letters Jesus wrote to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. These were churches that faced the same danger we face today. They were in a spiritual battle. The Lord gave them a series of warnings. Notice the progression in these warnings (observation by J. MacArthur, "The Master's Fellowship" letter, 8/21/89): "First, we leave our first love (Rev. 2:1-5). Remember the passion we had for Jesus Christ as new believers?...Second, we begin to compromise (Rev. 2:12-17). We lower our standards and copy the world's way. We enjoy our worship service the most when it becomes like the church on television and seeks to attract people through entertainment. Third, we begin to tolerate sin. That happened to the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:18-29). Fourth, we focus on activity and programs instead of real spiritual life. How can we tell when a church is just a hollow shell sustained by activity, like the one in Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6)? Then the departure becomes complete. The hypocrites take over, and the Bible is no longer the center of our faith. Like Laodicea, the church is rich with money but miserable. And the Lord warns, 'Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth' (Rev. 3:16)."

The church in Sardis was in danger. It was a church that focused on "activity and programs instead of real spiritual life." Why is that so bad? For two reasons highlighted in v 1.

#### A. We know the truth about Jesus.

V 1 "And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write: These things saith he that hath the seven spirits of God, and the seven stars." That's quite a description of the Risen Christ! First, He holds the seven spirits of God. Most feel this is a reference to the Holy Spirit.

#### B. Jesus knows the truth about us.

This letter was written to the church in Sardis. The city of Sardis had some peculiar features that impacted the church in Sardis.

Alan Johnson points out in his commentary (448), "Sardis was a city of peace, not the peace won through battle, but 'the peace of the man whose dreams are dead and whose mind is asleep, the peace of lethargy and evasion.'"

*1. He knows what others do not know.*

*2. He knows when we substitute activity for intimacy.*

Ron Jensen (as told in Morley, 38-9), for his doctoral thesis, rented a travel camper and traveled around the country with his wife. His task was to interview 350 Christian leaders. At the end of the tour, he made a discouraging observation. He said, "I found a great deal of zeal for God's work, but very little passion for God."

## **II. Issue #2: We need deliverance (2-3).**

### A. Admit we need to change (2-3a).

*1. Wake up.*

*2. Strengthen.*

*3. Remember.*

*4. Hold on.*

*5. Repent.*

B. Be aware of the consequences if we don't (3b).

**III. Issue #3: We must make a decision (4-6).**

A. The remnant is our model (4).

*1. A few were pure.*

A. W. Tozer said (in Morley, Man in the Mirror, 31), "A whole new generation of Christians has come up believing that it is possible to 'accept' Christ without forsaking the world."

*2. A few were worthy.*

*3. A few will walk with Him.*

B. The reward is our motivation (5-6).

**Implications: What must we do?**

1. Make sure we know Christ.

2. Make sure we are growing in Christ.