

Revelation 3:1-6 "A Letter from the Lord to a Dead Church"***

Main Idea: 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).
 - A. Admit we need to change (2-3a).
 1. Wake up.
 2. Strengthen.
 3. Remember.
 4. Obey.
 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).

Make It Personal: What would Jesus say about us today?

1. Is there evidence that I am alive?
2. Is the evidence real or superficial?

Did you realize that churches can die? The good news is that they can live again, yes, but they can die. Jesus made a death pronouncement about a church over nineteen centuries ago and we'll ponder that announcement this morning.

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. As we stared at him, we 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

***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.

"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? What's the remedy for *deadness*?

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

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:¹

"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 verse 1.

A. We know the truth about Jesus.

What is the truth? Verse 1—"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." That's quite a description of the Risen Christ! He holds the seven spirits of God. Most feel this is a reference to the Holy Spirit. There is only one Holy Spirit, but the number seven signifies completeness. The Holy Spirit gives life to the Church, and that is exactly what the church at Sardis needed. Programs can't revive a church. Only the Spirit can.

Something else revealed about Jesus is that He holds the "seven stars." According to 1:20, the seven stars are the seven angels of the seven churches, which several

¹ Observation by J. MacArthur, "The Master's Fellowship" letter, 8/21/89

commentators feel refers to the pastors of the churches. The truth about Jesus is that He knows all about His church. He knows what their leaders are doing (or not doing). He knows what their real need and condition is. And for a church going through motions, that spells d-a-n-g-e-r.

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. Sardis was located about 50 miles east of Ephesus at the junction of five main roads. Sardis was a city that lived in its past. Seven hundred years before this letter was written, Sardis was one of the great cities of the world.² It had a strategic location, for it was situated on the top of hill 1500 feet up which made it almost impregnable. It looked like a gigantic watch-tower. The city was virtually indestructible, but it fell to enemies twice. Do you know how? They were caught off guard. They become lax.

That trait stuck with the city. Its people became known for their complacency. 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.'" What was true of the city was true also of the church.

Jesus hits the punchline in verse 1, "I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead." The KJV rendering goes like this, "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." In the other letters, Jesus began with words of commendation. But the best thing He could say about the church at Sardis was, "You have a reputation. A reputation is a good thing to have. But yours is false."

Jesus knows the truth about us. As we see in the case of the church at Sardis, there are two facts He knows.

1. He knows what others do not know.

He said, "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead." Many people apparently thought Sardis was a blue-ribbon church. Its reputation was popular. "If you want to see a church on the move, go to Sardis. That church is alive!"

That's not the way Jesus saw it. I like the way the Phillips Modern English paraphrases Jesus' indictment in verse 1, "I know what you have done, that you have a reputation for being alive, but that in fact you are dead. Now wake up!" Jesus sees what others do not see. He knows the truth. Specifically...

2. He knows when we substitute activity for intimacy.

Jesus said, "You are dead!" My friends, that is a serious indictment! Here was a church that had a good reputation before men, but Jesus says, "I know you are dead." Looks can be deceiving. What was their problem? The problem was that they had substituted activity for intimacy.

Ron Jensen,³ 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." When a church replaces love for God with busy-ness for God, the church is in danger. Others may not see it, but the Lord does.

² Barclay, 113

³ as told in Morley, 38-39.

A few years ago, I went to a conference to learn about church ministry. One of the seminar leaders was a well-known church leader. His books and tapes had been a great help to me. He was a gifted and motivational speaker. I left the conference very challenged. Some time later, I received a postcard from his board saying he was out of the ministry due to moral failure, sin that had been going on for a period of years. I was reminded of this truth. A person can be active for God at the same time he is far away from God. The Pharisees were. They put on a facade on the outside to cover up their lack of life on the inside.

If your life is barren, here's the first issue you must grasp. It's serious. You are in danger.

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

The church in Sardis was in danger, but it was not beyond hope. If we are barren, how can we experience the hope of deliverance? Here's where we start...

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

Jesus used five imperatives that, if followed, would bring life back into the lethargic church at Sardis.

1. Wake up.

Verse 2—"Wake up!" Wake up from your spiritual slumber! Be watchful. Remember Jesus' words to Peter and the others? "Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation (Mt 26:41)." But instead of watching, they slept.

The Bible has much to say about "watching." We are commanded to watch against the wiles of the devil (1 Pet 5:8). We are to watch against temptation (Matt 26:41). We are to watch for the coming of the Lord (Matt 24:42-43). We are to watch against false teaching (Acts 20:29-31).

One thing's for sure. We can't be watching if we are asleep!

In Sardis, there was a large temple dedicated to Artemis. Evidence of the temple still remains today. Archaeologists have found the ruins of a Christian church building in Sardis, too. Guess where? Right next to the pagan temple!

Please realize the problem in Sardis wasn't doctrine—Jesus doesn't point out any heresies that needed correction. There's no mention of persecution either. And that should raise a yellow flag for us. God's Word clearly states in 2 Timothy 3:12, "All who live godly lives in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." Jesus said (Luke 6:26), "Woe to you when all men speak well of you."

Apparently, the church at Sardis was not doing the job in the area of evangelism. There was no persecution because they were staying off the enemy's turf. As Warren Wiersbe observed (577), "No friction usually means no motion. The unsaved in Sardis saw the church as a respectable group of people who were neither dangerous nor desirable." The truth was the church was so lifeless it wasn't worth attacking!⁴

What did the church need to do? Jesus said first, "Wake up!"

2. Strengthen.

Verse 2—"Strengthen what remains and is about to die." There was a glimmer of hope left, but that flickering light would soon be gone if change didn't occur. And soon. The death of the church was on the horizon.

⁴ Barclay, 117

The end of verse 2 gives us an insight into the core problem, "For I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God." [KJV "I have not found your works perfect before God"]. Don't miss this. In the sight of men, this church seemed alive and active. But in the sight of God, the church was dead. As the LB puts it, "Your deeds are far from right in the sight of God."

3. *Remember.*

Jesus continues in verse 3, "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard." The church didn't need new information. They needed a refresher course. They needed to go back and remember.

Jesus didn't tell them to look within, but to look back. Modern humanism says, "Look within yourself for your answers. You have all you need within you." The Bible says, "No! My heart is deceitful and wicked. My heart is prone to rationalize and say, 'My problem isn't so bad. I'm okay, you're okay.'" No. Don't look within. Look back. Remember God's objective truth which we have been taught. The answer is not in you, but it's in the Book." Remember.

Someone has said if we practiced even 10% of the truth we have "learned," our lives would dramatically transformed! We need to spend a lot more time *remembering* what we've learned.

4. *Obey.*

Here's what we're to do with this objective truth we remember. Verse 3—"Obey it." KJV—"Hold fast." Trust *and obey* for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus. And fifthly...

5. *Repent.*

"Remember what you have received and heard; obey it, and *repent*." Make a change! The aorist tense indicates this is a one-time action. You don't slide out of deadness. You break out of it. "Break out of the mold you're in," Jesus says. "Repent! Admit the hard-to-swallow truth that you need to change, and then change!"

Here's the first step a person needs to take to be delivered from sin. He needs to admit he needs to change. Frankly, one of the greatest reasons people don't change is a breakdown right here. They really aren't convinced they need to change.

E.g.—

If that's the case with us, what then? We need to hearken Jesus' second charge to the church at Sardis.

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

The Lord said at the end of verse 3, "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." How does a thief come? When we don't expect him (i.e. "unexpectedly"). When he comes he disrupts our lives. Jesus warned He would come as a thief. Elsewhere, the idea of "coming as a thief" refers to Jesus' second coming, but here it carries the idea of immediate judgment. "Wake up, or else I'll come when you don't expect Me. Then you'll wake up, but it will be too late."

The problem that plagued the church at Sardis was not an isolated event. It can happen to any church or any Christian. In 2 Timothy 3:5, Paul warned of apostates who would have a form of godliness but deny its power. Moffat translates, "Though they keep up a form of religion, they will have nothing to do with it as a force." Activity is no substitute for intimacy. Jesus said in John 15:5, "Remain [abide] in me." You can have Christian activity in your life without abiding, but you can't have genuine fruit.

How can you tell if a church is great? I'm concerned about how many are answering that question these days...

"They have programs for all ages! They've got a great softball team, aerobics classes for the ladies, summer trips for the teens, and structured programs for the kids. That's a *great* church." Oh really? The YMCA can offer those. Beloved, we must not measure successful churches by the wrong standard. The real issue is, "Is it a church where the people walk in obedience to Jesus?" If you spent a week with those church members, would you get to know Christ better from observing them?" If so, then it's a great church. If not, then something's wrong.

What do we need to do if we are spiritually barren? We need to grasp three issues. One, we are in danger. Two, we need deliverance.

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

Perhaps you're thinking, "It can't be done. My life is barren, my Christian experience is empty, and I'm not convinced I could ever change." But it can be done! How do we know?

A. The remnant is our model (4).

Not everyone in Sardis was dead. Jesus says in verse 4, "Yet you have a few people [KJV 'a few names'] in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes [KJV 'have not defiled their garments']. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy." God had His remnant in Sardis, His faithful few. The Lord held them up as "exhibit A" for the rest to see and follow. What was true of the few?

1. A few were pure.

Jesus said a few "had not soiled their clothes." Please notice there may be "good" people in corrupt churches. That doesn't change Jesus' assessment of the church. It's still dead. It does, however, give hope that life can return if the rest are willing to make the right decision.

And what's the right decision? It's *purity*. Not just in the area of morality, either, but in all of life. Be pure. Don't just go through the motions. Be the real thing.

A. W. Tozer said, "A whole new generation of Christians has come up believing that it is possible to 'accept' Christ without forsaking the world."⁵ That's tragic. There can be no zest in our Christian experience if we sacrifice purity on the altar of personal pleasure.

There were a few in Sardis who had not soiled their garments. It's quite possible this image refers to what happened at baptism. In those days, when a person was baptized, it was common for the person to be given a clean, white robe when he came up out of the water. It was a symbolic picture that said, "You are in Christ now. You are clean." But sin can defile our robe, if we let it. And that's what happened to most of the church members at Sardis. Thankfully, not all. A few didn't. A few were pure.

2. A few were worthy.

Worthy to what? They were worthy to claim the name "Christian." It supposed to mean something to identify yourself as a "Christian," a follower of Christ. Many claimed the label falsely. But some had a right to use it because they did follow Christ. A few were, indeed, worthy. Consequently, they were entitled to claim a promise.

⁵ In Morley, Man in the Mirror, 31

3. *A few will walk with Him.*

“They will walk with Me.” What a great reason to be pure and walk worthy! Those who are will walk with the Savior. Which leads us to a second factor which will help us to make this all-important decision.

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

What was true of the remnant can be true of the rest. Verse 5—“He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.”

Here’s a reward that ought to motivate us to make this decision to repent of barrenness. If we do, Jesus says He will do three things for us.

1) He will privilege us to be dressed in white. That means He will make sure we are appropriately adorned to spend eternity with Him. In that day, white robes stood for festivity, purity, and victory (When a Roman triumph was celebrated, all the citizens put on white).

2) Jesus will insure that our name will not be blotted out of the Book of Life. In the ancient world, a king kept a register of his citizens. Citizenship was very important to the Roman people. Jesus says, "I guarantee heavenly citizenship for overcomers." You’ll never lose it. What's more...

3) "I will acknowledge [confess] his name before my Father and before His angels." If we boldly identify with Him now, He will do so with us then. By the way, the opposite is also true for the one who denies Christ (see Luke 12:8-9).

Verse 6 indicates Christ intended for all of His people to reflect on this letter. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Let’s do that now...

Make It Personal: What would Jesus say about us today?

We need to ponder two questions.

1. Is there evidence that I am alive?

What kind of evidence indicates a person is alive and growing in Christ? Let’s take inventory of our lives with the following checklist:

1) Do I have a consistent time in my daily schedule in which I worship Christ (in which I engage in Bible study, Bible meditation, prayer, singing, fasting)?

2) Does my calendar and my checkbook reveal that knowing Christ is my #1 priority in my life? When we spend more time in the gym than in church, and when we pour more money into hobbies than the Lord's work, we're revealing we really don't mean business about growing in Christ.

3) Have I substituted busy-ness for godliness? This can include "religious busy-ness." Sometimes we can do things FOR God to try to distract the focus from my need to be right WITH God. Are you alive and growing in Christ?

But the fact remains. Looks can be deceiving. That was the case in Sardis. Since that's true, a second question is in order. First, is there evidence that I am alive?

2. Is the evidence real or superficial?

I cannot answer that question for you, nor can you for me. Am I really alive in Christ, or just going through the religious motions? Make sure you know Christ, beloved.