



Sunday, October 29, 2023

Revelation 3:1-6

Revelation 3:1-6 (NKJV)

“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write,

‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. 2 Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. 3 Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. 4 You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. 5 He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but 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.”

Now the church in Sardis was unique in that it was very different from any of the other churches that we have read about thus far. Whereas most of the other churches were relying heavily on the Lord for provisions, not Sardis. Due to its location on major trade routes, Sardis had become a significant commercial hub and had become a wealthy city and so the church in Sardis also began to reflect this wealthy status. In many ways, it was the church that other churches looked up to. It was a very active church, well structured, services were well attended, events ran like clock-work, and in that region, it would have been the equivalent to a thriving mega-church of today.

All of this however, is the reason why Jesus references their name here. Because the church in

Sardis had made a name for itself and they were proud of that name. Unfortunately however, that name was being elevated above any other name - including the name of Jesus - and that was the problem. They had become entirely self-sufficient - relying on their name instead of His.

To which Jesus now says, *'I know that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead....'*

Which is a really strange thing to say isn't it? The literary term for this kind of statement is the term 'oxymoron' which is a term that is used to describe two contradictory terms being used together. You are alive, but you are dead. It's an impossibility to be both alive and dead at the same time. So what is Jesus really saying here?

When I first read this section, I was immediately reminded of a rather odd sort of phenomenon that happens in nature. There is this creature called a Zombie Beetle that is a fitting example of what was happening to the church in Sardis:

https://youtu.be/d2BgmhWr9Dw?si=1Cf_fi--vfXME12L

So, Jesus says you are alive but you are dead - which is exactly what we just witnessed with the beetle in the video. You see, this beetle was infected by a parasite that started to consume the beetle from the inside out. The closer it got to the vital organs, the more control this parasite began to command. Over the course of the next few days the parasite would continue to consume the beetle from the inside out until the point where the beetle itself is actually dead but looks alive because the parasite has taken control of its limbs and muscles. And so, it moves like it's alive, it functions as if it's alive, it walks as if it's alive. But make no mistake, the beetle is anything but alive - the beetle is dead.

And so the church in Sardis was doing all the right things, performing all the right actions, crossing all of their T's, and dotting all of their I's, but in fact, there was no life in them. They were just going through the motions. Perhaps in their busyness, they lost sight of why they were doing what they were doing. Or perhaps, they lost sight of for whom they were doing what they were doing. Whatever the case, once thing is for certain, Jesus Christ was not the central figure at the church in Sardis.

Notice the representation of the lampstands in Jesus' hand in this church. What is the purpose of the lampstands? Literally to shine the light of Jesus. Well, where do they get the light from? From Jesus who is in the midst of the lampstands. They simply draw their strength from the Source in

order to shine the light of Jesus that will draw other people back to the Source which is Jesus Christ. Another word for this is discipleship and it is what Jesus calls every church to in the Gospels: to go into the world and share the truth of Jesus Christ with everyone, everywhere. Whereas the church in Ephesus was empty because they had lost their first love, the church now in Sardis was equally as empty and were just going through the motions because they had lost their connection to the source.

In the Gospel of John, we are given a beautiful picture of what connection to the source looks like. Jesus says:

John 15:5

'I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.'

Which means that you can do all the right things, have all the right programs, raise your hands in worship, give your tithes and offerings every single week, sign up for membership, get baptized, volunteer in kidsview, show up to Wednesday night courses, yet if you are not connected to the Source... then just like the church in Sardis you're just going through the motions....although you are alive, you are dead.... BECAUSE Jesus says, 'Without **me** you can do nothing.'

Because the actions aren't the point - anyone can mimic actions. The heart behind those actions is the point because the position of the heart dictates the intent behind the action.

In one scenario, the actions are an attempt to connect with God. We think that if we do all of the right things, raise our hands, give our money, volunteer...etc then God will be pleased and we have thereby *earned* right standing with Him.

But the other way might look the same, but the intent of the heart is very different. The intent is not to earn but to thank. This scenario starts with a heart that is connected with Jesus and every action that comes out of that is simply a *response* to the Love that He has already poured out on us.

This is what it means to be connected to the vine. Because when you have Jesus as your Source providing all of your strength and energy, then you can't help but bear good fruit! It just comes out of you....

I think the best way I can illustrate this is if I go back to the days when I was dating Jordan. Her

family would always rent a cottage up north and we would go up and spend the week on the lake. This is where I learned to wakeboard. I thought that because I was a good snowboarder, that I would be a natural at this but wakeboarding has something that snowboarding doesn't - a rope. And that rope is essential to the art of wakeboarding. Once I finally learned how to get up on the board, I then learned very quickly the importance of that rope. That the only way to succeed at the art of wakeboarding was to keep that rope in your hand. Because that is your connection to the source. But if I let go of the rope, then it would be all over - even if it doesn't look like it at first. You see, for a few seconds after I let go of the rope I kept on riding and I'm like - look at me - I can do this!!! But inevitably, every single time I do this I end up sinking because without connection to the source I can do no thing.

And so, this was the case with the church in Sardis, they were running on their own strength and had lost connection with Jesus Christ and if they did not heed the warning of Jesus and repent and correct their behaviour then that church would fall. Because for a church to operate without Jesus as its Source, it's only a matter of time before sin and deception creep in. Which is exactly the state that the church in Sardis is at.

The second thing I want you to see about the church in Sardis is that up until this point, and in every letter to every church thus far, Jesus has made it very clear that He knows the pressure that they are under, but does not release them from it, because that pressure is a natural, expected result from when light penetrates the darkness and the darkness resists. The Greek word for this resulting pressure is the word, 'Thlipsis,' which identifies that pressure as persecution, tribulation or even trials. Now, the first time I read this section I had to read it again to see what their pressure was but interestingly, I couldn't find it. Why? Because Jesus is actually completely silent on the subject and there is good reason for that, because this church, although seemingly alive, is not actually being a light in the darkness and therefore was not experiencing the persecution or tribulation that the other churches were walking through. Think about the depth of that statement. They weren't being a church, so Satan - their enemy saw them as an ally instead of a foe.

Now, let's bring some more societal context into this. Just like the rest of the 7 churches, Sardis was a city that was under Roman rule at that time. Just like in Thyatira, Sardis was a hub for trade and commerce so the trade guilds were employed here as well as a way to govern all import and export coming in and out of the city. The only way to operate as a merchant in these cities was to be a part of the guild and being a part of the guild meant being a part of their idol worship and sexual immorality as well. And so, because Jesus does not mention the pressure they are under in regards to this - simply a call to repent - the basic understanding is that they were justifying sin by embracing the

ways of society and had begun to blend society, culture, and Christianity all together as one to make it comfortable for all.

One commentator said that, *'the church in Sardis was the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity. They weren't having to face persecution because as John White - the author of Eros Redeemed says: The Church had silently accommodated itself to the immorality of the city. And he would also argue that the single biggest reason why the church in North America is not effective in evangelism is that we too have silently accommodated to the immorality of our time; that far too many disciples of Jesus are trapped in secret sins.'*

They are just going through the motions.

They are alive.....but they are dead.

Listen, very clearly church. As Christians we are called to give our yes to Jesus. Invariably there will be times when our saying yes to Jesus will ultimately mean saying no to the ways of the world. And listen, sometimes it can be so, so hard to say no. Especially when the ideologies that we are saying no to bear the faces of our friends, coworkers, neighbours and even, especially family. But the church cannot go down the road of sacrificing the truth of Jesus, on the altar of comfortability no matter how hard it can be.

We need to stand for truth but we need to do it with grace. This is what Jesus did.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is described as being:

John 1:14b

'full of grace and truth.'

This pairing suggests that both qualities are essential in understanding exactly how Jesus operated. Let's explore these two briefly:

Grace: Grace is often understood as God's kindness shown to us when we didn't deserve it. It represents forgiveness, compassion, and the unconditional love of God. Grace is what allows sinners to be reconciled to God, even though they might not "deserve" it based on their actions. Grace is getting something they don't deserve.

Truth: Truth on the other hand refers to the doctrines of the faith, moral absolutes, and the reality

of sin and righteousness. It stands as an unwavering standard by which beliefs and actions are measured.

The challenge is that these two are on opposite sides of the spectrum thus creating a very real tension between the two. They are, however, meant to be used in conjunction with each other, but many people do not understand how grace and truth work together and therein lies part of the problem.

The challenge can be that when speaking truth without grace, the approach can become legalistic, judgmental, or overly rigid, potentially leading to exclusion or condemnation.

Conversely, emphasizing grace without truth can lead to permissiveness, moral relativism, or a failure to address sin and its consequences.

In John 8 a lady is caught in adultery and about to be stoned according to the Law. Jesus comes in and shows His great love by extending grace towards her. In this action she deserved death according to the Law but Jesus looked at all those holding the stones and showed them that they were just as guilty as she was so they dropped the stones. Notice that by doing so, Jesus was very careful not to sacrifice the importance of the truth of what she had done. He identified her sin and applied grace through forgiveness to her life but then commanded her to go and sin no more. Grace never excuses sin. Grace never justifies sin. Grace never says go and keep on sinning. No, the goal of grace is to move us to embrace the truth and live accordingly and is there to help us get back up if we miss the mark and sin again.

The problem with the church in Sardis is likely that they didn't like the societal pressure or uncomfortability that comes with calling sin, sin. So they moved right on past grace and began to justify sin and therefore truth would have become subjective at best. So hence the words from Jesus - you are alive, but you are dead.

Now, speaking of grace. We see the grace of God exhibited in this section as with the others in that these messages are not meant to be punitive or judgmental, but corrective. Jesus wants the church in Sardis to be strong, healthy, and vibrant. And so he gives them a list of 5 things that they must do to correct their behaviour in verse 2-3:

Be watchful. But the actual translation of this word leans more to the strong urgency that is associated with the term **'wake up!'** This would have resonated well with the church because of the history

of the city at that time. Sardis was situated near the foot of Mount Tmolus and was initially built as a fortress. Its strategic location made it nearly impregnable to attacks, but its overconfidence in this fact led to its downfall twice as they had become too complacent and let their guard down. So the fact that Jesus uses this terminology here would have been very sobering for all those that were there that day.

Strengthen what remains. Well, since Jesus has already told them that they are dead - that their connection to Jesus is gone at this point - then what is the **'it'** that remains that Jesus is referencing here? I think it's a call to reassess everything that they are doing in the church and to get back on track by making the name of Jesus famous instead of their name. To make sure that all doctrine, programs and events are actually strengthening the church by pointing the people back to Jesus.

Remember what you received. This is a call back to the Gospel. The term remember is different from the term receive. This suggests that at one time they were a Biblical church but that somewhere along the way they had become lost. And they need to go back to the beginning - to remember who was once their cornerstone.

Hold fast. After their eyes are opened to the remembrance of who Jesus is and how much He loves them and the gift of salvation that was given to them, the call now is to never let it go. You remember it, now hold onto it.

Repent. It is imperative that they acknowledge their sin and ask forgiveness for it.

So basically, Jesus is saying to the church: *'Snap out of it - this is more serious than you realize. Get your focus back on Me and remember the gift of salvation that I poured out in love towards you! And don't you dare let it go again. Acknowledge your sin before Me and repent of it and I will forgive you and cleanse you from all unrighteousness.'*

At the end of the day, the issue with the church in Sardis was that they wanted to be known. And, somewhere along the way, some lost sight of their identity in Christ and became more concerned about being known and loved by others instead of Christ. They used their lampstand to draw people to their own name rather than shining the true light of the gospel of Jesus. Ultimately, it seems, some of them chose to deny Jesus rather than suffer loss of reputation. To trade the glory of Christ for the praise of men is the most tragic exchange. And, perhaps, that is why Jesus leaves us with this final word. To the one who overcomes, Jesus says, "I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels." What could possibly be more humbling and meaningful and hopeful than the Son

of God declaring, *“Father, and all you his angelic hosts, this is my child.”*

If Jesus would look at us with His blazing eyes - what would he see? How many of us would admit that we are alive but really dead....

It's a call to holiness and consecration. It's a reminder to call sin, sin. It's a reminder to be connected to the Source through the Word, Worship and Prayer. It's a call to abide in Him.

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