

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known  
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

## *The Church of The Living Dead*

### **Revelation 3:1-6**

**Keywords:** Revelation, prophecy, End Times, Jesus Christ, Seven Churches, Sardis

**PowerPoint Presentation included:** None

**SermonAudio Blurb:** Nothing would be worse to hear as a church than the Lord of the Church declare you to be dead regardless of how alive you thought you were. In this short, incisive letter Jesus lays open a situation that fits too many churches in the West today— the appearance of life but the reality of death.

#### **I. Introduction.**

##### **A. Read 3:1-6.**

1. We come to one of the passages that I think most resembles the state of the church in America. Therefore it is certainly one that deserves our close attention.
2. This letter is one that concerns me most because it describes a church that thinks it is well and it isn't. It sees itself in a vastly different way than the Lord of the Church.
3. Self-deception and rationalization are very powerful forces in the minds of mankind, both individually and corporately.
4. In other words, it is easy to study this passage, preach this passage, or listen to this passage and think it is for other churches. I want us to simply hear and consider. To lift up a prayer to our Lord that asks Him to show us ourselves more clearly.

##### **B. Sardis.**

1. This city that was on a slow decline. It used to be a capital city but that is now past by the time of the writing of the letter.
2. There was still much wealth but not growth.
3. The placement of the city among the unique structure of the surrounding hills made it almost impregnable, having only a narrow way into the city. At the same time, the safety of the city also restricted its ability to grow, which in turn affected its future.

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4. The city is divided into the most ancient section the was set further back into the hills and the relatively newer section. The result was that the older section became the acropolis.
    - a. Interesting bit is that because this city had two distinct sections the name was pluralized in the same way that Athens was. It was a double city. (Thomas, 240)
    - b. Before the Roman Empire Sardis was the key city for the Lydian kingdom so whoever controlled it controlled that kingdom. Most who tried to take it lost.
    - c. Cyrus, the king of Persia, conquered it in 549 B.C. during a counter-attack. The Lydian army had withdrawn into the safety of the city and was preparing to crush the Persian army who was effectively cornered. But the enemy literally had soldiers climb the steep sides of the hills one by one in the night and conquered the city. The king had decided that they were so safe in their city that there was no need to have a watchman on such a difficult area. One man could have keep the destruction from happening. (Ibid.)
  5. By the time the Romans were in power this city was well past its prime, though it retained a level of wealthiness and comfort.
  6. There was a large synagogue there and apparently the Jews were well tolerated in spite of their monotheistic views. This, in turn, protected the Christians as well.
  7. But just as the city was past its prime, so too was the church.
    - a. It was not like the Laodicean church, boasting in its riches.
    - b. Rather, it was simply a very comfortable church in a very comfortable and safe place.
    - c. A lot like many churches in North America and Europe.
  8. The result was an indifference to truth and spiritual things.
- C. Jesus' self-description.
1. How Jesus describes Himself here is very revealing in light of what He then says to the church. Both statements again come from Revelation 1.
  2. The seven spirits of God (1:4).
    - a. Remember that the key here is to understand both the description and the number seven.

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- (1) The spirits are described as being before God's throne.
- (2) But the number seven helps a lot for it is a number that often refers to God Himself. A number of fulness, perfection, or completeness. Therefore you may recall that it is Revelation's way of saying "the Holy Spirit."
- b. Why is this important? Because the means by which anyone becomes part of the true Church is through the Holy Spirit.
  - (1) Being made alive/regenerated.
  - (2) Jesus baptizes us in the Spirit into His Church/body.
  - (3) The very life of the church is because we are sealed and empowered by the Holy Spirit.
  - (4) The Spirit gives us gifts to use in the Church.
  - (5) And Jesus as the Lord of the Church holds the Spirit in His hand. This is a description of Jesus' control and authority over the very life of the church.
3. The seven stars (1:16).
  - a. This one is even easier to understand because 1:20 tells us what it means.
  - b. The stars represent the messengers of these churches. And it is important to note where they are, in His hand.
  - c. He is the Lord of the Church and He is the Chief Shepherd. The leaders of any church are merely under-shepherds who are called to be faithful in feeding, leading and guarding the Church, which is also called the flock of God.
4. Meaning:
  - a. Negative:
    - (1) Jesus is the one who makes a church and destroys a church. He is the one who gives the Spirit and He is the one who oversees true leaders in His church.
    - (2) Think of being called into your manager's office and sitting with her is the director of HR. You need to be very careful.
  - b. Positive:

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- (1) Jesus is the Lord of the church and He is the one who bring life into it.
  - (2) The way He does this is through the regenerating and empowering work of the Holy Spirit upon which every church truly depends.
- c. Both of these are likely in view. Sardis is in grave trouble and they need to sit up and take notice. But the answer to their genuine needs are right there in Jesus Christ.
- d. It is the mystery of the good news in Jesus Christ.
- (1) All of us are born in sin, under the power of sin, trapped and without hope. The bible describes us as being under the impending wrath of God.
  - (2) And so the answer is to flee that wrath.....but where?
  - (3) To God, who is Jesus Christ.

## **II. The Church of The Living Dead.**

### A. What Jesus knows:

1. Their reputation is one of being alive.
  - a. I think about this term, “name” or as ESV renders it, “reputation” and it bring many thoughts to mind.
  - b. One key one is the metrics by which churches judge themselves.
  - c. Not bad in themselves but they are not true indicators.
  - d. I think we forget the nature of the Christian faith at times.
    - (1) Jesus came in weakness and as a Servant.
    - (2) He called men who were of no repute to be the apostles.
    - (3) The Scripture that not many wise nor powerful are chosen by God.
    - (4) And yet we find ourselves intrigued and moved by so many indicators of external success and life in a church.
2. But their reality is that of being dead.

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3. What is meant by “alive” and “dead?”
  - a. It is spiritual life and death.
  - b. There is an external appearance of life but there is not the reality of that life.
  - c. Question: What are some ways a church can appear to be alive but be dead instead?
    - (1) Perhaps the best way to answer this is to consider what makes a church a church:
      - (a) The preaching of Christ-centered Word.
      - (b) The external witness of the Ordinances.
      - (c) The proper practice of church discipline.
    - (2) But these must be actually present, not merely potentially present.
      - (a) Many churches claiming to preach biblical messages but then you hear the message.
      - (b) So often I ask pastors if they practice church discipline and they say yes. Yet no one has ever been disciplined in recent memory.
      - (c) The strength and weakness of creeds and confessions.
        - i) Augsburg Confession is a great document of the Lutheran church.
        - ii) Westminster Confession is the same for the Presbyterian.
        - iii) 1689 London Baptist Confession .
        - iv) All of these and many others exist and are stated to be the confession of many churches. But so many of those churches are dead.
      - (d) Certain types of buildings.

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- (e) Hymns or worship songs, pews, giving plates.
  - (f) Prayer.
  - d. What are indicators of spiritual life?
    - (1) Romans 8:29 where we are predestined. Are the people modeling Christ? Can you see a trajectory in their lives?
    - (2) John's epistles, diminishing the person of Jesus and diminishing the simplicity of love for the brethren for deeper knowledge.
  - e. On an aside, in both this church and the one in Laodicea there is no mention of foes. It is possible that peace with the world lends itself to this spiritual deadness.
- B. What Jesus commands (2-3):
- 1. Wake up.
    - a. Literally mean to be watchful and alert.
    - b. Image here is of a watchman who is falling asleep and is unaware of impending danger.
    - c. When a church becomes complacent it is ready for destruction.
    - d. Used in Revelation 16:15; Matthew 24:42; **1 Corinthians 16:13**; Colossians 4:2; **1 Thessalonians 5:6**; 1 Peter 5:8.
  - 2. Strengthen what remains.
    - a. This is a word of warning and one of hope.
    - b. It is sad to consider for it speaks of the fact that much of the spiritual life of the church was gone, but there was a bit that still remained. It is like a dying fire that needs to be fanned into fulness again.
    - c. Notice that they are about to die FOR the reason that they were not completed, they are about to die.
      - (1) Their works are not "perfect" brought to fruition/ripeness.
      - (2) The idea here is that these deeds have merely the external appearance of life and religion.

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- (3) But before the eyes of the Lord they were not true nor the type that stood the test of time.
  - (4) This type of faith is not the kind that fails under persecution; rather, it is the kind that fails in peaceful times. More like the 3rd soil, the worries of the world, keeping up with the neighbors, needing more comfort, taking care of the bank balance.
  - (5) What Jesus is saying is that there is radical action that is needed.
3. Remember.
    - a. They are to reflect and contemplate what once was versus what is.
      - (1) This requires honesty.
      - (2) This requires careful thought.
      - (3) This requires a willingness to acknowledge the problems that are there.
    - b. They need to go back to the basics, the gospel which they had heard and received.
  4. Keep.
    - a. The keeping is a call to go back to those few things that remain and start there.
    - b. Capture them again in their hearts. Treasure them and gather them close to their souls.
    - c. Then begin the process of rebuilding them again.
    - d. Once they were a sound church and because of that there are always things upon which they can build.
  5. Repent.
    - a. This is simply the turning away from one direction and belief system to follow another.
    - b. In this context it is an awareness that they have lost the path of eternal life.

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- (1) They have forgotten Jesus.
  - (2) They have forgotten holiness.
  - (3) They have forgotten submission to the Word of God.
  - c. They must shake off the slumber and turn again to what is true.
  - d. Don't make one more move in any direction until they know what and where to turn back to.
    - (1) in other words, it is not to go look for a new idea or a new way.
    - (2) It is to go back to the old paths, to the paths of their fathers.
- C. What Jesus warns:
1. If you don't wake, I shall come as a thief. Think about what is meant by that image?
    - a. This imagery, when applied to Jesus, usually refers to His return.
    - b. Simply allowing the image to speak for itself we can take away certain things:
      - (1) Suddenness/no warning.
      - (2) Loss of something (2:5).
      - (3) Inability to plan.
      - (4) Discover after the fact.
  2. They will not have eternal life like those in the church who have remained, kept, remembered, etc.
- D. A glimpse of hope (4).
1. "But...."
    - a. In the most of the other churches so far there has been a moment where Jesus makes this strong contrast from positive to negative.
    - b. Here it is the exact opposite. You think you are alive but you are dead. But. Some are not— but just a few.



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- c. Again this imagery of how bad the situation really is. A church that is filled with false Christians playing church with only a few who truly trust in Jesus Christ.
  2. They are described as having not soiled their garments.
    - a. Likely a general term of not allowing themselves to be conformed to this age and the lifestyle and values of this age. They stand distinct.
    - b. The garment pictures the righteousness that is their's through Jesus.
  3. This is why it shifts from the present to the future about walking with Jesus in white.
    - a. In Matthew 17:2 it is Jesus who has white robes.
    - b. In Acts 1:10 two men wore white robes, likely angels, were present at when Jesus ascended to heaven.
    - c. And in Revelation 19:8 and 14 it speaks of what awaits all who are faithful to the end.
- E. What Jesus promises:
  1. The one who overcomes shall have white garments—a symbol of life and righteousness.
  2. The one who overcomes shall remain in the book of life.
    - a. This often causes people to think that a true Christian can lose their salvation. And taken all by itself one could easily conclude that.
    - b. The answer is rather simple though. This is still a church, believers are still present.
      - (1) Looking at the church corporately you have many who profess faith but are false and those who profess and are true.
      - (2) The image is that all those who claim Christ are written down, but only those who stand fast remain.
  3. The one who overcomes shall have his name confessed before the Father and the angels.

## **III. Conclusion.**

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- A. First, Jesus Christ is very much aware of what goes on in any place that claims to be a church.
- B. Second, that in spite of a horrendous situation in Sardis, there were those who truly were believers and faithful.
  - 1. Even if you find yourself in a bad situation all around you the Lord is not telling you to fix it all. But He is expecting you to be faithful in it. A bad church environment is not an excuse to dabble of sin.
  - 2. Also, though you may feel very alone at times it is encouraging to know that Jesus is still aware of you and that you are His. This reminds me to press on.
- C. Third, it is good and wise for any church to pause and consider their true spiritual state. And it is good for each person professing faith in Christ to do the same.

## **IV. Benediction/Doxology.**

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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## **Small Group Questions**

- **What are the things you see most pressing on the spiritual life of a church in our culture?**
- **What are ways you personally do to prevent yourself from being stained by this present age?**
- **How might passages like Matthew 18:15-17 help in keeping true life in a church?**