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Scripture: A Message to the Church-Sardis

As I continue to hover around the mid-fifties, I find that my body does not always respond in the ways that it used to. Where my movements were once “cat” like smooth and lightning quick, I now find my bones are more likely to crack and creak with each step. In fact, just a simple task of going up and down the stairs now creates this symphony of sights and sounds that are sure to entertain those within ear shot. I have seen this happening to family and friends as they age as well. More often than not, the week is arranged around medical appointments rather than work or sports schedules.

Personally, I am not one to make an appointment to see a doctor unless it is an absolute emergency but I have been encouraged lately to have an annual check-up just to ensure that my health is monitored and maintained.

Those of you who make an appointment with your doctor part of your regular routine know the drill. He or she uses various instruments and checks some “vital” signs. These may include:

- pulse
 - blood pressure
 - body temperature
 - Respiratory rate- breathing, lungs
- Other important measures of our body’s health include:
- reflexes
 - eyes (apparently pupils tell a lot about health).
 - Ears, nose, mouth
 - heart beat (regular, irregular)
 - Chest sounds (for moisture)
 - Check for irregular bumps
 - Height and weight measurements

With today’s technology many of us are able to monitor these vital signs daily with our Fit Bit or a health app on our phone. My Samsung Health App allows me to manage my exercise, food intake,

calories burned, sleep patterns, heart rate, blood glucose and blood pressure among other things but they don’t replace a doctor. For most of us, regular health checkups usually result in positive feedback and we are encouraged by our doctor with some tips to maintain health, including having regular checkups. For some however, perhaps this is your experience, a routine trip to the doctor reveals some surprise. Maybe it is the news of a health concern that you weren’t expecting. Everything seemed okay but things are not always as they seem.

Have you ever thought what it would be like to have a spiritual Fit Bit or phone app? Something that just kept track of how many steps you took “in faith” each day. Or monitored the times you shared your faith, demonstrated grace or exercised mercy? How often throughout the day did you serve the poor, stand against injustice or work for relationship reconciliation?

I know what you are thinking. A spiritual fit bit or app would just feed into a legalistic mindset, a works mentality but remember it was James, the brother of Jesus who said in,

James 2:14

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?

I know some of us are fanatical about our physical health which is good but don’t you think it would be interesting to have something wrapped around our soul that would send us a spiritual health report periodically? Perhaps a project for those of you tech wizards out there.

We launched a new message series at North Park a few weeks ago, entitled, A Message to the Church. Things aren’t always as they seem. It is a series that

finds us in the very last book of the bible, the book of Revelation. As Christians, it seems that we have this morbid sense of fascination with Revelation but it may be one of the most misunderstood books in all of the bible.

As a way of review, remember that Revelation is written in a style of literature called Apocalyptic. In our culture, we understand apocalyptic to mean doom and gloom but that is not at all what the people of the first century, the time in which this book was written, would have understood. Things aren't always as they seem.

They would have thought of something more inviting. Something that would impact the way that they live. Apocalypse in the Greek, the common language of the New Testament, simply meant, the unveiling. It was used when talking about lifting the cover off of a box or pulling back a curtain in a theatre. It meant opening up or maybe more dramatically, breaking through.

Revelation is all about the breaking through of Jesus. In no other book of the bible do we see Jesus as clearly and as compellingly as we do here.

One last reminder. A distinctive of Apocalyptic literature is that it contains a lot of imagery, symbolism and numerology. The book of Revelation is chock full of images and pictures that are used specifically to get a point across in vivid detail. Scholars believe that Revelation was written by the Apostle John, Jesus' beloved disciple, around the year 96 AD. John is now in his mid-eighties and he is in exile on the prison island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. Sent there by the Roman Emperor at the time, Domitian because John refused to bow down and worship him as Lord and God.

While John was incarcerated, the persecution grew worse for Christians and the Christian church. We are told in Revelation 1, that John was worshipping the Lord one day, much like we are doing here today and Jesus responds by giving him a revelation, an apocalypse. It is like Jesus pulls back a curtain and gives John a powerful vision of who he is and in Revelation 1:19-20, he tells John,

Revelation 1:19-20

"Write down what you have seen—both the things that are now happening and the things that will happen. 20 This is the meaning of the mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."

The lampstands referred to here represent these seven churches of this day, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. But they could be messages for all churches. Jesus is telling, John, I want you to write a message from me to these churches specifically, and to my followers everywhere. Tell them, this is what I see.

Two weeks ago, we looked at Jesus' message to the church at Ephesus. Oh, they were doing a lot of great things. They were busy and offering many different programs but Jesus said,

Revelation 2:4

"But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first!"

They had forgotten their first love. To love Jesus and others.

Last week, Shane looked at Jesus' message to the church at Pergamum. Literally in a city where Satan has his throne. Remember the mountain Shane showed us with the google earth picture? Jesus warns his church against false teaching and idolatry. Stick to the truth and allow the grace of God in you to impact your city and permeate the culture.

Today we come to Revelation chapter 3 and the fifth letter transcribed by John and it is the shortest of the seven messages. It is addressed to the guardian angel, to the church at Sardis.

At this time, Sardis would have had a population of between 80 000-100 000, about the size of my former home city of Waterloo. If you have your bible, turn to Revelation 3:1, Jesus says to John.

Revelation 3:1

“Write this letter to the angel of the church in Sardis. This is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars:

This church at Sardis is about to receive news of a spiritual check-up that Jesus has performed on them and unfortunately, the news is not good. In fact, it is going to catch them by surprise because from their perspective, everything is okay. Perhaps like a surprise diagnosis you have received from a doctor. Things are not always as they seem! Jesus, the Great Physician, has performed a check up on this church and the results are surprising and grave. DEAD.

They're dead.

Revelation 3:1

“I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead.

Have any of you been at the bedside of a person when they have died? Standing in a sterile hospital room as you watched the EKG line of a person you love go from movement to a flat line. Dead. No life. It is an incredibly emotional and helpless feeling. Five years ago, this coming June, I stood at my own father's hospital bedside for hours and watched and waited, knowing there was no hope. Eventually that machine would flat line. There was nothing I or anyone else could do, and he would be gone. Dead.

For most of us that have no medical knowledge and didn't know how to read the machines, perhaps we would conclude that the patient was only sleeping. But the experts, the doctors, know when the body is dead because the vital signs are gone.

As Jesus stands in the midst of his lampstand, the church at Sardis, he is an expert on their state of health and condition. Remember the church has its origin in Christ. Who knows it better than Jesus, and he makes his diagnosis.

The community around you may think you are alive, You certainly are active, there are a lot of programs, a lot of people coming and going.

In fact, the church at Sardis was the largest of the seven churches at this time. The weekend services

were well attended. The offering plates were probably full.

Dead, says the Lord. You're dead.

Isn't that confusing? Look as he goes on to explain.

Revelation 3:2

Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God.

In other words, Jesus says to them, your actions, the way you are living out your life doesn't align with what you are teaching in the church. You talk about one thing on Sunday morning but from Monday to Saturday, your lives don't reflect who I have called you to be.

Revelation 3:2.

I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God.

What exactly is Jesus getting at here? Perhaps he is referring to the fact that: This church at Sardis never finished anything it began. Oh, they are really good at starting things, but struggled with the finish. Do you know people like this? They are there for the enthusiastic beginning but soon enough the shine goes off the project and they get distracted by the next great idea and things get left hanging. Work projects, school projects and jobs around the house are left half done. They get great marks for the ideas and plans but in the end, most of it is useless because they have little follow through. They lack the perseverance and stay with-it-ness needed to finish a job. Do you know what happens when we operate like this? We become content with mediocrity. We give a half-hearted, superficial effort and it shows and Jesus says that kind of attitude is deadly to the health of my church.

The second thing Jesus could be condemning this church for is that:

The church at Sardis has forgotten why they do what they do.

In all your busyness, Jesus may be saying, you have left me out of the equation. You have lost sight of why you are doing what you are doing. Or perhaps

better stated, they have lost sight of whom they are doing it for.

Do you ever find yourself doing this? Let's just take a moment and think about some of what we have done even here in the last half hour. The worship songs we have sung during this service already. Did you realize that you sang that and what you promised to do? Do you really promise that? As a Christian, in the midst of our own busyness, we can forget or neglect why we sing or promise the things we do. I can get caught in this a lot in my day to day world. Occasionally, I have to force myself to stop and recalibrate. To remind myself about why I am doing the things I do and who I do them for.

For those of us who declare to be Christians here, we can work hard, stay busy, serve regularly and still forget why and for whom we are doing it. Just think back over your week? In the things that you did, was the reason, Jesus? Was your focus, Jesus? Was your motivation, Jesus? Are we like the Sardis church? We have forgotten why we do the things we do and for whom we do them?

The third issue Jesus may have with this church is:

The Church at Sardis has forgotten what to do.

They don't finish. They have forgotten why they do the things they do and for whom and they have forgotten what to do. For all their activity and great programming, the church at Sardis is not doing the one main task that it was called to do as a church. Does anyone know what the Church at Sardis was called to do? I will give you a hint. It is the same thing that North Park church is called to do. Does that help? What about this? Look at,

Revelation 2:1

This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands:

Jesus is walking among his churches represented by lampstands. Why Lampstands? Lampstands exist for one reason. Does anyone know? To give light. To burn bright in the midst of darkness. When Jesus says to the church of Sardis, I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God, means not doing the one thing Jesus called his followers and

the church to do. SHINE! In the midst of a darkened world, SHINE!

Look what Jesus says to his followers in his masterpiece Sermon the Mount.

Matthew 5:14-16

No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. 16 In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

The church is a lampstand and lamps exist for one reason. To give light to a darkened world. To bring hope in the midst of hopelessness. Our lives, fully surrender to Jesus and indwelt by the Holy Spirit are to bring light wherever we go. It is interesting to note that this message to the church at Sardis is the only one of the seven messages that Jesus gave to his churches that did not include some sort of encouragement as they faced persecution. The reason? Sardis wasn't being persecuted. Why? They were dead! They were not dangerous for Jesus so the evil one left them alone.

They were practicing a form of inoffensive, politically correct Christianity that wasn't a threat to the idol worship, immorality and pagan culture of the city of Sardis. They were not shining a light for Jesus on anything. They had turned their light off and blended right in to the culture. They had forgotten what to do and why they existed. The church at Sardis wasn't being persecuted because it wasn't speaking out on anything. They were practicing a wishy-washy brand of Christianity that was content, comfortable and complacent and Jesus calls it, dead! They are dead.

Let me remind you that the Christian life is a call from Jesus to enter into a relationship with him. We have often used the expression in the church that to become a Christian means to pray and invite Jesus into our heart. Have you ever said that to a child, you need to invite Jesus into your heart? You will get quite a puzzled reaction.

In actual fact, Jesus not only calls us to invite him into our lives but we are also invited into his life. Into all that he has done and will do. In John 15:4-5 Jesus says,

John 15:4-5

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. "Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.

Apart from Jesus, our light goes out. We cannot do what we were made to do. Shine the light of Jesus that brings hope to the world.

Oh, we can be busy and active. We can go through all of the motions. We can even perform all of the duties associated with a Christian life such as prayer and bible reading. People may even comment on our vitality but apart from the true intimacy with Christ we will never have authentic life in us.

Apart from Jesus, our power source, we die!

Once we no longer live in the power of Christ, the church settles for being comfortable and safe and like the church at Sardis, we can no longer distinguish between life and death. This is a pretty bleak message so far, would you agree? Surely there has to be some hope somewhere. Can those who are dead be brought back to life? Fortunately, we have a savior that specializes in that sort of thing, bringing people back from the dead.

When my dad was 52, at a wedding of a neighbor and in the midst of the celebrations, he had a massive heart attack. He was whisked to the hospital that was nearby, thankfully. His heart stopped twice that night. I was instructed to gather our family together as they were not certain he would make it. Each time his heart stopped, he was revived by the paddles. He was brought back to life and he went on to live 26 more purposeful years.

In this message to the church at Sardis, Jesus says all is not lost because he offers them and us, his grace. It is like Jesus applies the paddles to this church in the form of five urgent commands and they need to respond immediately or the consequences will be eternally fatal.

His five urgent commands?

The first is:

Wake Up!

Jesus says it twice in this passage. The church has died because it hasn't been more observant of their health. This cry, wake up! does have some meaning and history with the people of Sardis. Twice in Sardis's history, the city had fallen captive to an enemy because they became too comfortable and complacent that they didn't see the enemy as it snuck up on them and overtook the city. That happened twice! Once you can maybe understand but twice!? The history of Sardis teaches us that we are never more in danger of falling than when we get too comfortable!

Stay alert. Be watchful. Don't let your lamps burn out! Wake up!

The second urgent command from Jesus to his church.

Strengthen what remains.

Revelation 3:2

Strengthen what little remains...

My experience with churches is that we can become very good at doing things out of routine and habit and then five, ten or even forty years go by without someone ever stopping and asking, is what we are doing still accomplishing our biblical and redemptive mandate?

We have gotten to a point here at North Park, that we prayerfully consider and evaluate almost everything we do. That is reason for the survey you completed today. To evaluate. Which helps us determine what we do and why we do it. This past fall over 150 North Park families received an evaluation to fill in about our weekend services. Why? So that we can strengthen and improve what we do here and why we do it. That is so important for vitality and purpose for a church.

Have you ever done this in your personal or family life? Just stop doing something and then re-evaluate why you do it. The challenge for us as followers of Jesus is to do the things in our life that strengthen our relationship with Jesus and fulfill his purpose for our life.

Have you ever just stopped and considered why you do the things that you do? It is a healthy exercise.

Strengthen what remains.

The third urgent command from Jesus:

Remember.

Revelation 3:3

Go back to what you heard and believed at first;

Remember. We use that word a lot to bring to mind things from our past. Our Christian life was never meant to stay stuck in the past but we can use our memories of Jesus' work in our lives as a comfort for today and a springboard to grow our faith for the future.

I journal every day and I save my journals and periodically I go back and reread them to remember the way that I have seen Jesus work in the good times and more difficult in my life. It gives me comfort for today and hope for tomorrow.

That is what Jesus is calling the church at Sardis to do. Remember the ways you have seen me at work in your life and the life of the church. I am still here. Use that for motivation to grow your faith into the future.

The fourth urgent command from Jesus:

Hold on

Revelation 3:3

hold to it firmly. Hold on!

What Jesus is telling the church at Sardis and us is that we cannot simply open our hearts up to him and his spirit once and expect that that is all we need. This is like buying a new car and filling the tank up once and expecting that will do you for the life of the car. No, you need to attend to the needs of the car regularly including refilling the tank.

In the same way, we have to offer our lives not just once but daily to Jesus. To surrender our wills and desires to his plan for our life. We can do that through prayer and meditation, reading the bible, attending church services and by serving in his name. It is a daily practice, a lifestyle. Christianity is a way of life that was never meant to be

compartmentalized on a Sunday morning. We sometimes use the expression when we are tired that our tank is half full! The Apostle Paul says in

Ephesians 5:18

be filled with the Holy Spirit

We need to top up our energy source, which is the Holy Spirit every day and hold on to it, firmly.

Jesus final urgent command is:

Repent

Revelation 3:3

Repent and turn to me again.

We talked about this in Jesus' message to the church at Ephesus. In fact, in almost all of the messages Jesus has for his churches, he calls them to repent. Remember, the word repent simply means turn around and go the other way. Jesus is telling the church at Sardis it is not too late but you must repent. Turn from the way that you have been going which leads to death and turn back to me which is the way to life.

Jesus' five urgent commands to the church at Sardis and to us are: Wake Up. Strengthen what remains. Remember. Hold On. Repent.

I wonder if any of these commands apply to our lives as followers of Jesus. Have we grown complacent in our faith? So complacent that we may not even realize that we are dying? Have we unplugged from our power source which is Jesus? What about this church? North Park? Oh, we are active and busy but do we finish things well or are we just starting, starting, starting? Do we know why we do the things that we do and for whom? Do we remember what to do? Do we know our purpose is to shine the light of Jesus into a darkened world? Something to ponder for sure.

I began this message talking about vital signs. Indicators of health. For physical health, the vital signs Doctors pay attention to are, pulse, blood pressure, body temperature and respiratory rate. A major fluctuation or problem in any of these areas can lead to sickness or even physical death. We go to doctors and rely on their skills and diagnostic abilities to catch the warning signs before they

become fatal. As a pastor in this local church, one of my responsibilities is to define the reality of our spiritual condition as a church and to encourage personal growth and development for us, as members of this body.

I have to confess that of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation, the condition of the church at Sardis strikes me as the one that North Park could be most in danger of becoming if we don't submit to regular spiritual check-ups. Some of you may be wondering, what are the signs of spiritual vitality for my life and the life of the church. Let me quickly suggest seven. I want to acknowledge the book *Discipleship on the Edge*, by Darrell Johnson for these vital signs.

Spiritual Vital Signs

As you listen to them, do a bit of a personal check list for your life.

We confess Jesus as Lord. That is so important. That we acknowledge the triune nature of God. Jesus is the Son of God and he lived on earth, died for our sins, rose from the dead and reigns forever as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Is that your confession? Is that our confession at North Park?

Our lives demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Are they evident in our lives and the life of this church?

Unity. We are all united through Christ. We belong to Jesus but we also belong to everyone else who belongs to Jesus and it is a bond that transcends culture, race, family, citizenship, economics and politics. As a church are we unified? That doesn't mean we have to agree on everything. But is the love that joins us together, Jesus, greater than the offense that seeks to separate us?

Compassion. Do we share Jesus' compassion for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized in our culture and globally? Does the way we live our lives draw people to us or away from us? Think of mosquitos to a light. Is our lifestyle contagious? Is the life you are inviting others into the life you are living?

Growth. Good health always leads to growth. Not just in terms of greater attendance in the pews on Sunday morning but in terms of reproduction. If a church is truly alive, people will be growing deeper in love with Jesus. People will be meeting Jesus and experiencing a new way to live life.

A desire to be Holy. In other words, growing in purity. Are we growing to be more like Jesus, to be holy? As our lives are transformed, we will recoil at sin and evil. We won't engage it in things like games, movies, books and videos. A willingness to die to ourselves. It seems ironic that a vital sign of health would be to die but in our spiritual lives we are called to lose our lives for Jesus. Are we willing to endure hardship, ridicule or rejection for his sake? To spend our money, our time and our gifts and talents for the advancement of his Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven?

Last weekend, out lead pastor, Matt Eckert stood on this stage at our AGM and announced that North Park will be planting at church in Stratford this fall. We have felt the call to reach out and share the gospel in the city of Stratford. In this announcement, Matt also stated that we need prayer, people and money to make this happened. When he said that, did you get excited for the possibilities or did you think, how dare he ask for more of my time and money?

That is an indicator of our spirit health.

Maybe after seeing this list you are thinking, I can't live up to that! Well, neither can I. That is the point. We can't do it without the supernatural help of Jesus. He never says to us, go it alone. No, Jesus says come to me and I will give you the strength and power to live the life I am calling you to.

This is what the church at Sardis failed to remember, that is why for all its activity, it was really dead.

Can I ask you a question?

What role does Jesus play in your life?

When was the last time you had someone ask you about the way you live your life or where you get hope? When is the last time you shared your beliefs, your faith with someone?

Have you grown a little too comfortable or complacent in your faith? Have we? As Jesus is walking among us today, his lampstand, what would his diagnosis be of our spiritual health? Are we alive or are we dead?

We have hope. When we come to him, he can revive us and breathe new life into us and then use us to be his light to a darkened world.

So, will we: Wake Up! Strengthen what remains. Remember. Hold on. Repent. As we come to Jesus today? Amen? Amen.

Points to Ponder

A Message to the Church

Things are not always as they seem.

Revelation 3:1-6 Sardis

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Share some experiences you have had with routine physical checkups at the doctor's office. Has the doctor ever checked your vital signs and found that there was a problem with your health? What were the consequences?
2. Do you know people that seem to be busy all the time but in the end, very little gets done? Why is this kind of activity dangerous to a person's spiritual life? Why is it hazardous to the life of a church?
3. As Christians, we are called to shine the light of Jesus into a darkened world. When do you feel you are shining the brightest for Jesus? When do you think you are not? When do you think North Park church is shining the brightest? When is it not?
4. List some of the ways that a church can get too comfortable or complacent. What are the dangers of that kind of attitude?

5. Describe some of the ways that evaluation takes place in your school? Work place? City? Church? Share some ways that you perform a personal evaluation in various areas of your life. Give an example of how this evaluation has led to you changing a behaviour.
6. The Spiritual Vital signs that Paul mentioned in his message include; Confessing Jesus as Lord; The Fruit of the Spirit; Unity; Compassion; Growth; Holiness; A willingness to die to self. Discuss each of these signs with your group. Which ones do you feel are healthy in your life? Which ones do you need to pay a little more attention to?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for a renewed sense of life and vitality in your walk with Jesus as you focus on the Spiritual Vital signs.